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OR, Old Riddles's Greatest Riddle.

The Story of a Town with a Mystery.

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RANGER," "THE ENGINEER DETECTIVE,"
THE "BROADWAY BILLY" STORIES,
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING PROPOSITION.

It was Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger—Zeb Horn, the veteran mountain tramp.

There he sat, as queer-looking and quaint and homely as ever, his long rifle reclining between his legs and his faithful old dog, Napoleon, squatting at his feet and looking up into his face.

"We're back ag'in, Nap, back to our old stampin'-ground," the old man said in a sorrowful tone, as he reached out his hand and patted the dog on the head; "back ter ther grand old Rockies, an' heur I reckon we'll end our days."

The dog whined and moved its tail knowingly.

ON THE DOOR WAS A WEATHER-STAINED PLACARD, ADDRESSED, "PARD RIDDLES."

"We thought we was settled fer life out East thar, old dog, but it seems it wasn't so ter be. When that good woman died—an' she was th' only woman that ever had boss sense, as I know you'll allow—when she died, then there wasn't nothin' fer us ter do but ter pack up our trappin's an' come back heur, an' heur we be."

At the mention of "that good woman" the old ranger drew his hand across his eyes, and had occasion to blow his nose several times within the next few moments.

"Yes, Nap," he presently resumed, with an attempt to clear his voice, which was a little husky and refused to be cleared, "that 'ar dream o' happiness is over, an' now thar's nothin' left fer you an' me ter do but ter try an' drown our sorrrers an' git all th' satisfaction out o' th' remainder o' our days that we kin. We was happy out East thar, an' that is a fact; but, it only lasted a matter o' two years. Three years ago if anybody had told us that we would take another partner inter our company, an' inter th' affections o' our hearts, we would 'a' laughed at him; but, that was jest what we did do. Old Zeb Horn never keered a pinch o' powder fer th' female sex, an', in fact, he was allus a little skeery o' 'em; but when that good woman with real boss sense kem along, Nap, he changed his views. We took that woman inter our hearts, we did, Nap, or, at any rate, I did; an' we folloed her out East, an' there, as she was willin', we married her—leastwise, I did. An' thar we settled down, an' was as happy as could be. But it was 'most too good ter last, an' that blessed female she took sick an'—an'—she died, an'—an' left us."

Here the huskiness in Old Zeb's voice became so much worse that he broke down entirely, and during the next few minutes his eyes and nose needed a great deal of attention.

After a time he was able to go on.

"Yes, Nap, old dog," he continued, "she died an' left us, an' then th' East wa'n't no place fer us. There was Kingsley, ter be sure, an' his purty wife an' th' little one, an' they was mighty good friends ter us, an' hated like p'izen ter see us strike out fer th' Hills ag'in; but we couldn't help that; we jest couldn't stay thar, an' so heur we be."

No further words of explanation are necessary. The veteran ranger's wife had recently died, and with his heart bowed with grief the old man had made all haste to get back to his familiar haunts in the Rockies, and there we find him.

It was about the middle of the afternoon on a beautiful summer day, and the old ranger had walked since early morning, his back toward civilization and his face toward his old home in the mountains. He was now within a mile or so of his destination, and had stopped to rest. And, as he sat there on the rock, looking around upon the familiar scenes, he talked to his dog, as had always been his habit.

For a long time then the old mountain-man sat in silent meditation, and his dog, taking advantage of the silence, had curled itself up at his feet and was partly asleep.

Suddenly the old wayfarer roused up with an exclamation.

"I know what we want, Napoleon, old feller, I know jest what we want," he cried, giving his leg a hearty slap; "come, rouse up, old dog, an' let me warm yer good old heart an' make it glad. We want some riddles, that is what we want, an' that is th' only thing that I know of that will bring our spirits up inter proper tune. We have got ter cast off this gloom an' sadness that has come over us, an' riddles is th' best ankerdote that I ever tried fer that purpose. We'll have some riddles, old dog, we'll have some riddles. Ha, ha, ha!"

Forcing a laugh and giving his leg another slap, the old man dived into his pocket and brought forth a little book, while the dog, thinking that it was invited to play a little, sat up and barked and whipped its tail from side to side merrily.

Those who read the first "Old Riddles" story will understand what is coming, but for the benefit of those who now make the acquaintance of the old ranger for the first time, just a word of explanation. The old Hills tramp always carried with him a little book of riddles, from the pages of which he was in the habit of regaling himself and his dog whenever opportunity offered. And it was this little book and his liking for riddles that had won for him his peculiar sobriquet.

"Yes sir-ee, Nap, we'll take a dose o' riddles," he repeated, as he opened the book, "an' that will put new life inter us both. But, hold on! This is th' wrong book. This is th' book that that good woman gev us afore she died, an' she said it would solve ther riddle of how ter git ter th' happy huntin'-ground an' win a crown o' immortal life. I don't know whether there is anything encouragin' in it fer you or not, Nap, but I hope there is. I know you would be pleased ter see me up thar, old dog, an' you kin gamble on't that I'd be eternally well pleased ter have you along. We'll look inter th' matter later on. What we air after now is riddles, an' nothin' else will do."

Replacing that Book in his pocket, he brought

forth another, and this proved to be the one he wanted.

"This is th' one we're after, Nap," he announced; "an' now be ye ready?"

The dog barked and wagged its tail.

"All ready, be ye? Well, let's see what I kin find. Let me see—Ah! here is one, an' I'll bet ye that ye don't guess it. 'Why is a man fightin' mad like a clock at a minute to twelve?' Ha, ha, ha! that is one that will make ye do some thinkin', my four-footed pardner."

The dog barked again, evidently willing to join its master in a little play if he insisted upon it, tired as it was after its long march.

"D'ye give it up?" the mountain tramp asked, after a moment's pause, as though he had really expected the dog to speak; "d'ye give it up? Then I reckon I'll have ter tell ye what th' answer is. Th' reason why a man fightin' mad is like a clock at a minute to twelve, is because he is about on the p'int o' strikin'. Ha, ha, ha!" slapping his leg again and laughing louder than before, "that was a good one, Napoleon, a mighty good one! I thought I could cheer ye up a little, old dog. You are great fer riddles, you be, an' I reckon you could almost live on 'em. Now here is another fer ye ter try yer skill atguessin' on. 'Why is an island like th' letter T?' That is one that will stick ye, I ruther reckon."

The dog had stopped in its frolic, and was looking up into its master's face, awaiting the signal for another gambol.

"Ye give that one up, too, do ye?" the old man soon remarked. "That bein' th' case, I'll have ter give ye th' answer to it. Th' reason why an island is like the letter T, is because it is in the middle o' water. Ha, ha, ha! that is a good one, too; d'ye ketch on to it, Nap?"

Here Old Zeb slapped his leg two or three times in succession, and laughed louder and more heartily than ever, and the dog, feeling that this was an invitation for it to do so, jumped and frisked around in a manner quite out of keeping with its years. And so they kept it up. The more the dog played, the jollier the old man became; and the more jocund became the old man, the more frolicsome grew the dog.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the old man laughed heartily again, after another riddle, when he had read a dozen or more, "that was another good one, Nap, another mighty good one. And now here is another. 'Why is the letter E like London?' Now that is one that will stump ye, or my name ain't Zeb Horn."

"Give that up, too, do ye? It seems that you ain't very good at 'em ter-day. Well, th' letter E is like London because it is th' capital of England. And now see if ye kin grip this one. 'Why is a pair of skates like an apple?' Now that is easy as kin be, if ye only git holt o' th' right answer."

That the dog did not do, so the ranger gave the answer.

"Th' reason why a pair o' skates is like an apple," he read, "is because they have both caused th' fall o' man. Ha, ha, ha! that wa'n't slow, nuther; an' now try this one. 'What is that which is higher an' handsomer when it has no head on it?' Now I kin see by yer off eye that ye give that one up, so I'll tell ye right off soon. Th' thing that is higher an' handsomer when it has no head on it, is a pillow. Now jest try this one, an' we will call a halt an' be on our way. 'Where kin happiness always be found?'"

As he gave out this one the old man shut up the book and put it into his pocket, preparatory to starting on their way.

"Can't guess that one nuther, eh?" he questioned, as he arose. "Well, th' place where happiness kin always be found, or leastwise so th' book says, is in th' dictionary; an' now if you are ready, Nap, we'll jog along. I tell ye there is nothin' like riddles ter stir up th' blood an' rest a feller, is there, old dog? I feel as young as I ever did now, almost. How do you feel? By th' fuss you are makin' I should say you feel purty good. We ain't fur from our old cabin now, dog, an' we'll soon be thar. Come on."

Throwing his long, old-fashioned rifle over his shoulder, the ranger strode away down the slope toward a little valley that lay below, the dog following at his heels as it had done for more than ten years.

When he reached the level of the valley, the tramp veteran increased his speed, evidently eager to see his old cabin, after being away so long.

"I wonder if th' old place is still thar, Nap?" he interrogated. "It is many a day since you an' me was here last, an' no knowin' what has taken place here sence then. It ain't more'n a mile furdur, now, an' we'll soon know. It will be ruther rough on us if some vandal hand has burnt th' cabin down, I vow it will; but we won't borry trouble. Th' weather ain't bad fer sleepin' out o' doors, if sich should be th' case, an' Zeb Horn has made more'n one cabin in his day. Come on, dog."

They were a quaint pair, Old Riddles and his dog, and they had lost nothing of their wild instinct by their two years' sojourn in the East. The old ranger had resumed his mountain attire, which he allowed was more becoming to

him than "store clothes," anyhow; and here they were, back again in their former haunts. But they had withal an air of outcasts, as though they had been driven back into the wilderness by fate, after a pleasant season in the land of civilization, as indeed was the case.

Straight on down the valley they went, and, as they drew nearer to the place of their destination the ranger increased his pace. He was more than eager now to look once more upon the old habitation that he had once bade farewell forever, as he had thought at the time.

"Come on, dog," he shouted, as he finally increased his speed to a trot, "it is now only jest around yander bend, an' then we shall know whether we have got a home or not. Come on, Nap, come on!"

In a few moments they rounded the bend, then Riddles gave a shout. The old cabin was there, just as he had left it, and, increasing his speed to a run, he was soon at the door, to behold something that surprised him not a little. On the door was a weather-stained placard addressed "Old Riddles," which, when he had finally made it all out, read verbatim, as follows:

"PARD RIDDLES:—Et luks ez ef yue hev gon awa fur sum tim but ispoz yuel be bak sum tim agen an so i leve this notis fur yue tue rede when yue cum i hev maid a diskuvry an wantd yue tue jine me in a big gaim when yue cum bak an se this cum right north an jine me enyhow. I am goin tue set out fur the bottomless pit."

"Yours tru, S. SAUL."

CHAPTER II.

"WE'LL GO THAR TOO."

FOR a long time the Rocky ranger stood and gazed upon that strange placard in utter silence, and then at last he ejaculated:

"If this is a riddle, Nap, old dog, I give it up. What kin it mean? He is askin' us ter jine him, an' then adds ther startlin' information that he is goin' ter set out fer old Satan's domain. We happen ter be travelin' th' other way; leastwise I hope we are."

Then followed another long spell of silence.

After a while the ranger leaned his long rifle up against the door, stepped back a pace, folded his arms and observed:

"Napoleon, my four-footed pardner, we must try an' git at th' bottom facks in this case, an' see what we kin make out of it. This was undoubtedly writ by our friend and old-time pardner, Sweetwater Saul. That part of it is clear enough. But, how long has it been posted up heur? We have been away a matter o' two years, an' it is mighty sartain that it wa'n't heur when we went. That bein' th' case, it has been put heur sence. But, how long sence? That is th' question. Th' stains o' weather it has on it goes ter indercate that it wasn't put up yesterday, nor day afore yesterday, but that it has been heur some months at th' least. I wonder if Saul has got ter his desternation by this time?"

This last query was uttered with a grim touch of humor, and for a moment a suggestion of a smile played around the old man's mouth.

The notice was written in pencil, as it looked to be, but Old Ripples had another view about that; and upon a piece of very coarse paper. It was not dated in any way, so far as could be seen, and there were no indications of tracks about the door.

"Saul ain't any great shakes at writin'," the ranger further ruminated, "an' his spellin' wouldn't win a prize, I don't reckon, unless it was fer its badness. As fer th' writin', though, that is about as good as anybody could do with a sharpened bullet, I opine, an' mebbly I couldn't do any better at spellin' myself. I sartainly wouldn't spell come c-u-m when it orter be k-u-m, nor notice n-o-t-i-s, when it orter be n-o-t-i-c. But, them leetle p'int's don't matter much when th' meanin' is made plain, which I am sorry ter say it isn't in this case. I kin onderstand th' last part of it th' best, but at th' same time that is th' part that worries me th' most."

"Now if he had only dated it, then a feller would be able ter git th' hang of it better. But, he didn't. Say, Nap, you jest nose around an' see if you kin git th' smell o' tracks heurabouts."

The faithful dog seemed to understand what was said to it, for it began at once to run around and smell of the ground, but it met with no success.

"Jest as I thought," the old man muttered, "there has been many a storm on th' scene sence th' paper was put up, an' th' trail is as dead an' cold as though it hadn't never been here."

Again he became silent and thoughtful.

"Let us read th' thing jest once more," he finally proposed, "an' read it slow an' git th' hull sense of it. No, never you mind about that, Nap, I will do th' readin' an' you kin listen. Now let's begin right at th' firstment of it. 'It looks as if you have gone away for some time, but I s'pose you'll be back some time, so I leave this notice for you to read when you come.'"

"Now, old dog, that is plain enough. Sweetwater Saul has come down heur ter see me, but didn't find me at home. He see'd that th' cabin was shut up tight, an' concluded that I had gone off fer quite a spell. That was nat'ral enough. An' it was as nat'ral that he should think that I

wouldn't stay away ferever, too. But it was quite onnat'ral that he didn't date th' billy-duke he left. Mebby, though, he didn't know what th' date was, fur I have been in that same fix more'n once, as you will remember. Many a time we have gone to th' settlements jest on purpose ter l'arn what th' day an' date o' th' year was. But, let's git on with our work o' solvin' th' riddle.

"Further it reads: 'I have made a discovery, an' wanted you to j'ine me in a big game.' Now that part is reasonably clear, too, Nap; he has found out somethin', an' wants you an' me ter j'ine him. What that somethin' is, though, ain't so clear. I reckon it's somethin' in th' way o' rascality, howsumever, fur Saul was allus great at bringin' villains to account fur their misdeeds, an' 'game' was allus his word fur all critters o' that breed. Now, let us take off another bite an' see if we kin mastercate it.

"When you come back an' see this, come right north an' j'ine me, anyhow,' it further reads. That is as plain as day, but th' p'int is, be we too late fer th' fun? This notice has on-doubledly been up here a long spell, an' mebbly Saul has finished his work by this time. What dy'e think we had better do about it? Dy'e think we had better go? An' now fur th' last part of it, in which he says he is goin' ter set out fur th' Torrid Zone—What kin' ye make out o' that? Kin it be possible that Saul has found th' trail that leads ter th' regions below, an' has set out on an expedition against th' Old Boy? If he has, I am afeerd that he has taken a big contract. I don't know whether I'd care ter j'ine him or not. I have hearn tell that th' Devil makes it rather warm fur anybody that happens ter fall inter his hands. Really, Nap, I don't know what ter say about Saul's startlin' propersition."

Thus the old man ruminated, as he stood with folded arms and read the notice over and over again.

It was truly of a startling nature, and something that he could not understand. It was clear enough, except the last clause, but that threw a darkening shadow over the whole.

For a long time the old ranger stood in silence, and at last he straightened up, unfolded his arms, drew a long breath and said:

"Napoleon, my four-footed friend, we're goin' ter strike fur th' north ter-morrer. It is plain that Sweetwater Saul wanted us, an' wanted us bad, too, or he wouldn't 'a' kem better'n three hundred miles ter git us. Don't you agree with me that that is sound logic? We may be a little late, it is true, but that is our misfortune an' not our fault; an' as th' old sayin' has it, Better late than never. We kin, at th' least, show our old friend that we ain't dead, an' that we have found his notice all right. More'n that, we will show him that if he ain't afeerd ter set out fur the land o' perpetual hot weather, nuther is Old Zeb Horn an' his dog Napoleon. Ain't I right, Nap?"

At this moment the dog sprang suddenly to its feet and uttered a low growl, and the ranger, reaching forward and grasping his rifle, looked around to learn the cause.

The dog was pointing up the valley, with its nose lifted and sniffing the air, and the old man knew that some person or animal was not far away.

"What is it, old dog?" he asked, "what is it? Is it b'ar? or is it human critter that ye smell? Come, tell me what it is, there's a good feller."

The dog gave vent to another growl, and the old man strained his eyes to get a glimpse of whatever it might be that was causing his dumb partner's excitement.

Presently an object came into view around a point of rocks some distance away, and that object proved to be a mule. It was saddled and bridled, but there was no rider upon its back. It was a small mule, with a long white streak down its face, and the instant Old Riddles saw it, he exclaimed:

"By hokey, Nap, but that is Sweetwater's mule, Polly Ann, jest as sure as your name is Napoleon! Now, whar kin Saul be? We must investigate this case jest as soon as we kin. Come on."

Immediately the old ranger strode forward to meet the approaching hybrid, addressing it as he advanced:

"Polly Ann!" he called out, "is it really you, or do my eyes play me a trick? Is it really and truly you?"

At the first sound of his voice the mule raised his head and stopped short.

"Don't be afeerd o' me," the old man reassured, "don't be afeerd o' me, fer I am as harmless as a kitten; an' if it is really you, Polly Ann, you kin be sure that you are heartily welcome here. It is Polly Ann, Nap, it sartainly is; an' now, what has happened to Sweetwater Saul? Stop your growlin', dog, fer this critter is an old friend o' ours: can't you see? Come on!"

A few steps brought the veteran to where the mule was standing, and patting it affectionately on the head, he addressed it thus:

"Polly Ann, I'm powerful glad to see you, I vow I am. How do you do! It is a long time sence we have had th' pleasure o' seein' each other. You're lookin' well, old mule, you be,

indeed. But, where is yer master? Where is my old friend Sweetwater Saul? Has he really gone to that pestiferous place he spoke of in his notice? It is mighty sartain that somethin' has happened to him, or he would be on your back. There is no gettin' around that. Where is he? From th' 'pearance o' things I should say he hasn't been on yer back fer a good many days. See here, Nap, jest take note o' these p'int as I 'numerate them: First, this homely but honest beast ain't been cleaned in a month, by th' looks of it. Second, th' saddle ain't been sot in fer many a day, fer it is dirty an' dusty as kin be. Third, every bit o' iron about th' rig is rusty, an' mighty rusty at that. An' add to all that, we kin see that th' saddle ain't been off th' critter's back very lately. What dy'e make o' all this? It speaks plainer'n any words kin speak, an' it sez that somethin' has happened to our old friend Sweetwater, an' th' old mule has been wanderin' around without any master. We'll go north ter-morrer, sure."

Taking hold of the bridle, the old man led the animal to the cabin, still talking to it and the dog, and there he secured it to a stake near the door.

"Thar, mule," he observed, "stand thar till I hustle around an' see what is ter be found in th' way o' feed. I reckon your appetite is keen too, Nap, fur I kin 'most allus gauge yourn by my own. Hold on, though; mule critters don't eat th' same as dog an' man critters, do they? they 'most allus take theirs with grass an' water, if I remember rightly. That bein' th' case, we'll have ter change yer quarters, Polly Ann."

Untying the mule again, he led it down behind the cabin where a little spring bubbled up, and when it had drank its fill he tethered it in a place where there was a rich growth of grass.

"Thar, that fixes you out all right," he said; "an' now, Nap, let's see what we kin do fur ourselves."

Up to this time the old man had been carrying a small pack upon his back. He now took it off and laid it down on the step before the door of the cabin. Then going to a little crevice in the rocks not far away, he brought forth a hammer and ax, both of which had been left wrapped in a piece of greased skin.

"Both in good order, Nap," he announced as he unwrapped them, "an' that shows th' wisdom o' takin' care o' tools. If I had shoved 'em under th' step, as I first thought o' doin', they would be no good by this time."

With the hammer and ax he set to work to "unlock" the door of the cabin, and after some little trouble succeeded. The old place was just as he had left it.

"Welcome home!" he exclaimed, as he crossed the sill, "Welcome home!"

A fire was made on the long-deserted hearth, coffee was prepared, and again Old Riddles and his dog ate together, as of yore. Then when night came on, and the mule had been cared for and made secure, the old book of riddles was brought out and a jolly hour was passed. Early next morning the cabin was closed again, the old ranger mounted the mule, and with the dog following, set out toward the north.

"Now," the old man exclaimed as they started, "we're off, an' if our old pard Sweetwater has really gone to that sulphurous region he spoke about, an' we kin strike th' trail, we'll go thar, too. Come on, dog."

CHAPTER III.

THE TOWN OF RUDBURY.

RUDBURY was one of the finest little towns in the whole Territory.

It was a new town, comparatively, had grown rapidly during the past two years, and was a favorite stopping-place for tourists—especially Englishmen.

About five years prior to the time of which we write, there had come into the Territory a man desirous of buying a tract of land. He did not seem to know just what he wanted, but "dilly-dallied" around for a long time. He passed by several handsome bargains, persistently made his way to the western part of the Territory, and there he finally set his mind upon having a tract in a wild, mountainous region, in which was situated a mining-camp, which afterward became more widely known as Rudbury.

This tract was inferior in nearly every respect to most of the others the man had looked at, but he was determined to have it and bought it.

He was laughed at for his choice, but seemed to care little for that, and it was a puzzling problem to all who were acquainted with the matter to guess what he would do with his "elephant" now that he had got possession of it. There was gold there, but the new owner clearly was no prospector, so mining could not be his objective aim. Those who had "sized him up," concluded that he was a "tenderfoot" with more money than brains, and really did not know what he wanted or why he wanted it; but while it was true that his pocket was well lined, it was equally true that he had an eye to business, and, though he might be a "tenderfoot," he was neither fool nor greenhorn.

Be the truth what it might, the man had come,

had purchased the land ("rock" describes it better), and in a few days after the business had been settled, had taken himself off and was never seen there again!

The tract, it must be remarked, had been public land, and in bargaining for it his dealings had been with the Land Office agents. This had not been the case with most of the offers he had refused. They had been made by individual owners. Whether he had any object in this or not did not appear. One thing was certain, however, and that was—if he had bought of individual owners there would have been the avoidance of a complication that afterward arose.

Just previously to the time of the purchase a prospector named Joselyn had staked out a claim on this very tract, and had had it recorded according to law. There were other claims there, too, but all save this one were discovered, and the new purchaser bought out the grubstakers. Likewise did he buy the camp, and all that pertained to it, and when he went away he had every reason to suppose that his title was clear and his right secure.

Some months passed; then a man named Richard Checkering appeared upon the scene, he having bought up the Joselyn claim, and opened the mine. "Morning Star" was the name he gave the mine, and from the very first it proved that he had made a profitable investment. This mine had what is known as a double lead, that is, two veins of the precious metal in it, and by working them both the mine yielded large profits on the original outlay.

Checkering was not long in learning all about the mysterious purchase of the tract in which his mine was situated, and foresaw that there was likely to come trouble out of it. The "Morning Star" was in the northwestern part of the tract, and right near the camp. With wise foresight the owner fenced in all his property, and laid a road out to the nearest trail beyond the border of the tract. This done, he erected within his inclosure such buildings as he needed, and then settled down to work the veins, confident that the owner of the larger claim could not disturb him.

A few months passed. Nothing had been heard of the man who had bought the big tract, and a few venturesome interlopers had, by this time, moved in and were quietly working the old claims that had been bought up along with it.

One day the rightful owner descended upon the camp, and he came in force. It turned out then that the man who had made the purchase had been simply an agent, and the owner was one Lord Rajpoot Rudbury, an Englishman. With him came his son, Stavendish Rudbury, and they had a large force of men who spoke some foreign tongue, and who could not understand a word of English, or, at any rate, not enough to be of any use to them. These men turned out to be Indians—not American Indians, but natives Bengal or Nagpoor, India.

They were a miserable, villainous set, and were quite evidently slaves, as the Englishmen governed them with hands of iron. Rudbury and his son could understand and converse with them, but there was no fear that any one else would do so.

Besides these there was a goodly force of Englishmen, some of them having wives and children with them. And it was clear that they had come to stay, for they had brought all their goods and chattels along. They looked like a small army as they entered the camp, and the usurpers of the place lost no time in getting out as soon as Rudbury made known his proprietorship.

Richard Checkering, though, paid no attention to the arrival of the party, but went right on with his business as though nothing had happened. Nevertheless he kept his eyes upon his new neighbors, and, truth to tell, did not like the looks of them at all.

The party began at once to erect temporary shelter, and while this work was going on, under the supervision of overseers, Rudbury and his son posted up notices to the effect that everybody engaged in mining on their property must stop operations at once, and must remove their effects within forty-eight hours. Others, such as saloon-keepers, keepers of stores, boarding-houses, etc., would be required to close their places immediately, or otherwise to enter into agreement with the proprietor of the town, and consider themselves his tenants.

As stated, the usurpers lost no time in getting out, but some of the keepers of saloons and stores entered into agreements for the remainder of the year, and so kept their places open. The only one who paid no attention to the notice was Richard Checkering.

Next day his mine was running as usual, and along in the forenoon he received a call from Lord Rudbury.

Checkering greeted him civilly, the same as he greeted any other utter stranger, and invited him into his office.

"I have called, sir," said Rudbury, "to inquire what you are going to do in regard to vacating my premises. You have no doubt seen the notices that I have posted up."

"Yes, I have read the notices, out of curi-

osity," Checkering owned, "but I cannot see that they apply to me."

"And why?"

"Because I happen to own this property."

"That cannot be, sir," the Englishman argued, "for an agent of mine bought up this tract about a year ago, and I can stow a clear title to it."

"If that is the case," returned Checkering, "of course I am in the wrong. I suppose you are willing to let me see your title-papers?"

"Certainly, sir," said Rudbury, and he drew the papers from his pocket and displayed them proudly; "these are the title-proofs."

Checkering looked at them, taking careful note of the dates in order to be sure of his ground, and when he had done so, he observed:

"These papers are all right, sir, and I guess your title is clear with the exception of this little claim of mine. My papers are dated a little earlier than yours. Here, take a look at them. These are only copies of them, but the originals can be produced if necessary."

The Englishman took the papers and looked at them, and saw that they were indeed dated about twenty-five days earlier than his own.

"But," he protested, his face growing very red, "I bought my land of the Land Office, and my title for it is clear and in full. What can you do about it?"

"The question is rather—What are you going to do about it?" was the American's rejoinder. "The land agents could not very well sell what did not belong to the Government, and you will have to look to them to correct your grievance. I am not going to run away, be assured of that, and I warn you not to interfere with me. Be sure you're right, then go ahead."

The blood of the Britisher fairly boiled. In England and India he had been used to having his own way, and his rule had been thoroughly despotic. Here, at the very outset of his experience in America, he was crossed by a man who utterly defied him, and, as it seemed, mocked him. This was too much for one of England's favored sons to stand.

"If what you say is true," he thundered, "somebody has got to pay for the outrage. These papers of mine give me a clear title, and your miserable Government has got to back me up in my rights. And, if I can't get satisfaction that way, I'll cut you off so you can't get out nor in. I own all around you, and nobody can hinder me from doing that."

"So do my papers give me a clear title," retorted Checkering; "and, as mine come in first, I can claim first protection. I suppose the Land Office will have to compensate you for your loss. As to your cutting me off from the main trail, let me advise you not to try it on. I do not profess to know how you do such things in your country, but here every man has the right of access to his property, and you can rest assured that I will maintain my rights."

A great deal more was said, but enough has been set forth to show how the case stood. The Englishman invoked the aid of the law; the matter was inquired into; it was found that Checkering's claim to prior right could not be overthrown, and that he was secure in his possession. In this event the value of his property had to be appraised, and the Territory had to make its value good to the Englishman. This was accordingly done, and Rudbury had to be content. Nor could he cut Checkering off from his right of access to the highway, as he had threatened. It was a bitter pill, but it had to be swallowed.

When it was all settled as indicated above, then the Englishman tried to buy Checkering out. But the latter would not sell. He was offered twice the sum the appraisers had named as being the value of his claim, but he would not yield. He had come there to mine because he liked the business, he declared; it paid him well; and he would not in any event throw his employees out of work and see their places filled by a lot of miserable foreign heathen, if not indeed slaves. He made the latter charge, but it was strenuously denied.

Finding that he could neither drive Checkering out nor buy him out, Rudbury had to make the best of the situation. His tract of land was between six and seven miles square, and contained from forty to forty-five square miles, all of which he owned clear and clean with the exception of the Checkering Mine, situated in the northwestern part of it.

During the legal fight, and continuing after it, Rudbury was busy improving his property. He opened one of the mines he had bought with it, working it with his Indians, and built quite a number of houses. Besides, he put up a big store, made and opened a large hotel, and, at the time of our story, the town, named after its owner, was as described at the opening of the present chapter; that is, it was one of the finest little towns in the whole Territory, and was alive and flourishing.

CHAPTER IV.

WAR-CLOUDS RISING.

It was a lovely morning in summer, and the town of Rudbury was alive with business and enjoyment.

We have said that it was a favorite stopping-

place for tourists, especially Englishmen, and they were there in force.

It was Lord Rudbury's name that drew them there, of course; but when they arrived they were not disappointed in the place, if they had looked forward to seeing a town of beauty in a setting of the wildest scenery.

Such Rudbury was.

There was the big store, where a good business was carried on; the large hotel, now having a goodly number of guests; the two prosperous and flourishing mines, one owned by Richard Checkering and the other by Lord Rudbury; and besides these, there were a number of handsome residences, not least among which was that of Richard Checkering. That stood second to none save only the residence of the English lord, which was in its way something of a palace, considering its surroundings.

Lord Rudbury was a widower, and his daughter, Victoria, presided over his house. She was about twenty-five years of age, and rather good-looking—as English beauty goes. Stavendish, the son, was about five years older, unmarried, and he also was a member of his father's household. They had a number of servants, and most of the time their house was filled with company.

Richard Checkering was a man of family, and his wife, of course, filled the post of honor in his establishment. She was a proud, haughty woman, had been something of a beauty in her younger days, and still retained traces of it, and was fond of having her own way as much as possible. They had one child, a daughter. Her name was Ermina, and she was now about twenty-two years old. She was a pretty girl, gentle in disposition and lovable in manner, resembling her father more than her mother.

These two young ladies, Miss Rudbury and Miss Checkering, were the acknowledged belles of the town. But—and we might say, as a consequence—they were not warm friends. They treated each other with formal politeness when they were together, but they went no further. This was not so much the wish of Ermina as it was the design of Victoria.

Mrs. Checkering courted the society of the English people of the town, those of rank and title, we mean; made herself the social leader as much as possible; and so of course Ermina was given a prominent place.

Little love was lost between Richard Checkering and Lord Rudbury, for the latter had never got over his defeat in the matter of the Morning Star mine. They treated each other civilly when they met, but that was all. The Englishman maintained a position of cold reserve, and the American did not offer to break through it. Mrs. Checkering would have had her husband curry favor with the titled Britisher, but he was not that kind of man, and so matters stood.

But this was not all nor the worst feature of the case. Cupid was at work in the town, and his darts had already pierced more than one heart.

There were two young men in the place who are to take active parts in our romance, and they may as well be introduced here as elsewhere. The first was one Harvey Blanchard, who was employed by Checkering as superintendent of his mine, and the other was the superintendent of the Englishman's mine, one Randolph Gwinnett. Both were good-looking men, about thirty-two or three years of age.

Gwinnett was an Englishman who had spent some years of his life in the gold regions of South Africa, and had there learned what he knew about mining, except a finishing touch to his education in that line which he had acquired in the United States. He was descended from a "blooded" family, and the Rudburys, father and son, treated him as an almost equal. But not so the daughter. To her he was her father's hired man, and nothing more. She would hardly notice him. But, strange to say, she was not so cold toward Harvey Blanchard.

The reason appears. Gwinnett loved his employer's daughter, but she did not favor his suit. On her part she loved, had she confessed it, Harvey Blanchard. And here were the seeds of future complications that were likely to spring up into stubborn growth.

On the other hand the case was slightly different. Harvey Blanchard loved Ermina Checkering, and she returned his affection; but her mother was bitterly opposed to her having anything to do with him, and favored the suit of Stavendish Rudbury, who had already asked for her hand in marriage. Here were more complications, and taking all together it did not promise unbroken peace for the future.

On the one side, Randolph Gwinnett had asked for the hand of Victoria Rudbury, and his suit was favored by Lord Rudbury and Stavendish; on the other, Blanchard had asked for the hand of Ermina Checkering, and his suit was favored, or at any rate not opposed, by her father, but her mother opposed it bitterly.

What would come of it all, remained to be seen.

On this morning of which we write, Stavendish Rudbury and Randolph Gwinnett entered the office of the "Bank of England" mine, which was the name Lord Rudbury had given

it, he being in some way connected with the real Bank of England; and there they awaited the arrival of Lord Rudbury.

The old gentleman appeared at his usual hour, and as soon as greetings had been exchanged, Stavendish said:

"Father, something has got to be done immediately about the Morning Star Mine. We must buy Checkering out or drive him out, and that without delay."

"Why, what now?" demanded Rudbury, senior.

"Why, they are working in their south lead, and in less than a month, if we do not stop them, they will break through into the—into our part, or into our mine."

"Ha! this is serious indeed," the old man ejaculated; "something must be done about it. But, what is it to be?"

"That is the question."

"It is as you said first," observed Gwinnett, "you must buy them out or drive them out."

"Not an easy task either way, I fear," commented Lord Rudbury. "It is pretty certain that Checkering will not sell out, and I do not see how we are going to drive him out. Can you suggest anything?"

This was addressed to both the young men.

"I am afraid that I am at loss for any plan," confessed Stavendish.

"I would suggest that you make Checkering another offer," advised Gwinnett, "and then if he will not sell, look around for some means of ousting him."

"That is what I will do," declared Rudbury, "and in the mean time you and Stavendish study up some plan of action."

"Whatever is done must be done without delay," reminded Stavendish.

"This is what I will do," the old gentleman suddenly exclaimed, struck with an idea, "I will go and see Checkering and tell him that he must abandon his south lead at once, as he is encroaching upon our line. I do not know that this is strictly true, but it may serve to bring him to a halt."

"It won't work," the superintendent declared.

"It won't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the shoe is on the other foot. Checkering is no fool, and he will be able to tell you within an inch how many feet he has to go yet before he will touch the line; and I have an idea that we are several feet over it, now, from our side."

"The dickens we are!"

"That is just the case. It will have to be one thing or the other; namely, to buy him out or drive him out."

Half an hour later found Lord Rudbury at the Morning Star.

Checkering greeted him as usual, with civility enough, but with nothing of warmth or friendship.

"I am come on business," the Englishman announced.

"So I supposed," was the response.

"I want to buy you out."

"Ha! you are still harping on that string, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, you will have to bid high, I can tell you that."

"That is what I am prepared to do."

"And I do not say that I will sell, mind you."

"I will give you three times the appraised value of the property, sir."

"You can't have it. I have added buildings since the value was set on the property by the appraisers."

"I will give you five times the set value, and in hard cash—Bank of England notes, sir."

"You can't have it. When I am tired of mining I may sell out to you, but at present I am not inclined to do so."

"Then you will not sell at any price?"

"I will not sell at all, at any rate not at present."

"Then it will be of no use for me to make you another offer?"

"It will not."

The English lord took himself off, and returned to his own mine.

"Well," Stavendish inquired immediately, "what result?"

"Just what I anticipated," was the response.

"A refusal?"

"Exactly. He will not sell at any price."

"Very well, then we know what we will do with him; eh, Gwinnett?"

"I think the plan will work," the superintendent agreed.

"What is your idea?" Rudbury asked.

"We will drown them out," explained Stavendish.

"Drown them out!"

"Yes."

"How can we do that?"

"We can drill a hole through to where they are working, fix a hose into it, attach one of our little engines, and pump water in upon them night and day."

"Will it work?"

"Of course it will. One night's pumping will

about fill the end of the shaft to such a depth that they will have to abandon it, and there will be an end of the trouble. We will take care that they do not get into it again, too."

"That plan certainly sounds reasonable," Rudbury confessed, "and we will try it. We will begin the work to-night. Chickering must not break through upon us, or we are lost. If there were no other way, my Indians know—But, we will not think of that except as a very last resort."

"And when Checkering complains of water," added Stavendish, "we will raise the same cry. The chances are that he will never suspect us."

"It seems to be our only hope of keeping our secret, and it shall be acted upon immediately. Gwinnett, you will pick some men to help you, and begin to work this very night. Let nothing be said, but push ahead as fast as you can."

And so it was arranged. What their secret was does not appear, but certain enough it was that they had one.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROCKY RANGER CHALLENGED.

"Whoa, Polly Ann! ye long-eared brute, ye; whoa!"

Old Riddles, the mule, and the dog.

Nearly three weeks have elapsed since we saw them last, and all that time they have been pushing steadily northward. They were now within a dozen miles or so of Rudbury.

They had made slow progress, partly because the old ranger did not understand how to get speed out of the mule, and partly because their course had not been direct. The old man had turned aside to stop at towns along the way to make inquiries for his missing friend, but thus far had met with no success.

Sweetwater Saul, so called from the fact that he had come originally from the country bordering the river of that name, was as completely missing as though the earth had opened and taken him in. It was a wide country, to be sure, and it would take a man a lifetime to scour it, but the simple fact that Saul had become separated from his mule was proof conclusive to Old Riddles that something serious had happened to him. It would have been a case of similar import had Old Riddles and his dog parted company, and the dog had been found wandering around alone.

It was about the middle of the day, and the peculiar trio had come to a fork in the trail. But it was no "trail;" the old ranger having turned aside from the main trail on the previous day in order to take a shorter cut across country toward a town he desired to visit. It was merely a natural wilderness path, if it could even be called that; and here it divided into two, and the old ranger wanted to stop while he made up his mind which course to take.

But the mule was a little stubborn, and would not stop as quickly as the old man wanted it to.

"Whoa, Polly Ann! ye homely-lookin' critter, ye! Whoa!" he repeated, with a little more vim; "why in tarnation don't ye whoa?"

Drawing up tightly on the rein, he now succeeded in bringing the animal to a stop.

"It do beat all what a critter you be," the veteran commented, as he slid out of the saddle to stretch his legs. "You will do jest what Saul wants ye to, an' he don't have ter speak to ye at all. How is it? I have ter holler and yawp at ye till I am in danger o' dislocatin' my lungs, an' then half th' time you'll do jest as ye please about it anyhow. If I owned a beast o' burden, you kin gamble on't that it wouldn't be a mule."

This was delivered at the mule with all solemnity of manner, and then the old fellow turned to his dog and added:

"An' I know you'll agree with me, Nap. There's no danger o' my tradin' you off fer a pesky mule. Now you jest keep yer eye on the beast till I look around here a bit an' make up our minds which way we'll go."

The dog, wagging its tail, walked around to the head of the mule and there squatted down, as though it had understood its orders perfectly. As he spoke, though, the old ranger had indicated with his hand what he wanted done.

"There's 'telligence fer ye," the ranger ruminated, a broad smile of satisfaction spreading over his face. "There's a brute-beast that knows somethin'. I wouldn't change old Napoleon fer the best dozen o' mules that ever kicked, and that is a fact."

Retracing his steps, for the mule had carried him a little distance past the forks, having taken the one that led the more up-hill, the old man stopped at the point where the way divided.

"Now," he mused, "which way am I ter go? This is th' fu'st time I was ever in jest this same spot, I reckon, an' I don't want to make any mistake about it. If one way is right th' other must be wrong; an' th' wrong way might cause me ter lose a whole day's travel. I wouldn't want that, fer I am about tired o' travelin' as it is. Let me see."

The way that led up-hill was narrow and rugged, while the other was broad, and, as far as could be seen, tolerably smooth. And these were the qualities that had drawn the old ranger's eye as the mule turned on the other fork, and caused him to stop.

"Hang me if I know which way ter go," he

reflected. "If I thought the mule was 'quainted hereabouts I'd trust th' beast, but I don't know whether it is or not. This down-hill road looks ter me ter be th' plainest sailin', an' I guess that is th' way I'll go. If I find I've made a mistake I'll score one fer th' mule. Hello! what sort o' critter is comin'?"

The ranger's sharp ears had detected a sound, and he turned to learn who or what was approaching. The sound came from the direction from which he himself had just come.

About the same time the old man heard it the dog gave vent to a low growl, and the mule pricked up its long ears.

"What in snakes kin it be?" muttered the ranger, and he brought his rifle in front of him so as to have it ready in case it should be needed.

The sound was a peculiar one, and the ranger decided that it was caused by neither foot nor hoof. It was unlike anything he had ever heard before in all his experience in the mountains.

He was not kept long in suspense, for the object soon came into sight around a bend, and the mystery was cleared up—it was a young man on a bicycle.

We say it was cleared up, but it was not so clear to the old man. He had never seen a bicycle before, and it was a surprise to him. His eyes flew wide open, and he ejaculated:

"Great Jonathan! stranger, what d'ye call it?"

This sudden interrogation seemed greatly to startle the young man, and he came to a halt immediately and dismounted.

"Oh! ah, glad to see you," he managed to say. "You startled me a little, though, I must confess."

"Glad ter see me, be ye? Wal, that is passin' strange, seein' that I don't know ye from Adam."

"Nor do I know you," the young man returned, "but you look like an honest man of the mountains, and I want to inquire my way."

"I don't belie my looks, I kin assure ye o' that," said Old Riddles, "but I am afraid that I shall be a blind guide fer ye, youngster, fer I was just wonderin' myself which way I'd better go."

"Then it seems that we are both in the same fix."

"So I should say. But, what d'ye call that critter you ride on? It is rather a curious beast, I should say. Now I have got a mule yander, an' it ain't mine, nuther, fer I wouldn't own one of th' contrary beasts; but hang me if I wouldn't rather have th' mule than that thing."

The young man laughed.

He was about twenty years of age, was clad in a bicycle-suit of pronounced English cut, and presented rather a peculiar appearance in the Western wilds; or at any rate so the old ranger thought.

"This is a bicycle," the young man explained, "and it is quite a serviceable tool on good ground, though it is not of much use on this sort of road. 'Pon me word I have had to walk it more than three-quarters of the way I have been over this forenoon. There is nothing of a joke about that."

"No, I should say not," commented Old Riddles (though perhaps he did not get just the sense of what the young man had said), as he looked at the "wheel" from every point of view; "I should say not. But, whar did you say you hail from? an' where is it ye want ter go to?"

"I am from the town of Rudbury," the young man explained, "and I want to get back there. Can you show me the way?"

"I guess I never heerd tell o' that place," answered the ranger slowly, as he scratched his head as though to stir up ideas. "What sort o' town is it, an' about how fur away would you reckon?"

"It is a fine little place, belongs to Lord Rudbury, you know, and—"

"No, I can't say that I do know," Riddles corrected, "and I don't know why you should take it fer granted that I do. I never heerd tell of it, as I said."

"Then you are certainly a stranger here."

"Well, I haven't been here insome years afore, that is a fact."

"That accounts for it. Everybody around here knows Lord Rudbury. But, how far away the place is, I can't tell. It might be five miles or twenty."

"That is rather indefinite, too."

"Yes, so it is; but really I do not know, for, as I have explained, I have lost my way. Did I not understand you to say that you are in the same fix?"

"That is about th' size of it. Not that I'm really lost, fer bless ye th' hull Rockies is my home; but I can't seem to get my bearin's on to a certain p'int?"

"And where were you heading for?"

"I want ter strike th' old minin'-camp that is called Button-hole."

"Why, that is the very place! That is the name that Rudbury used to bear, so I have heard."

"Yer don't say so! Then it seems that we're both runnin' fer th' same hole. When was th' name changed, and why?"

"Why, Lord Rudbury bought up a big tract of country here some years ago, and named the

town after himself. It is quite a place, I assure you. But, how are we to find our way there?"

"That will be easy enough now," Old Riddles declared, "for you kin take one of these heur trails, if I kin call 'em sich, an' I will take the other. In that way we can't miss it, don't ye see?"

"Yes," the young man assented, but the expression of his face went to prove that he did not see very clearly.

"An'," the ranger went on, "if you git thar first you kin tell 'em that I am comin', an' I'll do th' same fer you. I take it Button-hole is about a dozen or so miles away, if it is whar it us'ter be. Now, which way will ye take?"

"Why can't we travel together?" asked the young stranger.

"I can't agree to that, nohow," Riddles protested. "By so doin' we would have only one chance o' findin' th' town, where we now have two; an' besides that, I am sure Polly Ann, that is th' mule critter thar, would object to havin' sich a critter as this o' yours near her. No, I think we had better take different ways; I do indeed."

"There is one thing that I forgot to mention."

"An' what is that?"

"It is this: Three times since I have lost my way I have run upon places where I have been forbidden to advance further. Armed men have turned me face about as though they were the picket-line of an army."

Riddles looked at the youth in amazement. Was there something wrong in his upper story? or was there something wrong in the Rockies?

"That is rather queer," he declared; "never heard o' anything o' that kind in these parts afore. What sort o' critters was they?"

At that moment the ranger's dog gave a growl, and looking up, Old Riddles beheld an armed man standing on a ledge of rock just above them. The young man followed his glance, and exclaimed:

"That is one of them, sure as I live!"

"What are you doin' here?" the sentinel at the same moment demanded, "and where do you want to go? Speak right up, now."

CHAPTER VI.

THEY STRIKE THE TRAIL.

THIS was something new to Old Riddles.

In all his years in the Rockies he had never before been challenged in this manner, but had found the country open and free to him, to go and come as he would.

He did not like it. Leaning forward upon his rifle, he surveyed the sentinel for some moments in silence.

The man was a rough-looking fellow, well-armed, and it was clear at a glance that his challenge meant business. He had his rifle cocked and partly raised, and the veteran of the Hills and his chance companion were under its cover.

The young man had nothing to say, but left it all to the elder.

"Well," the man on the rocks demanded, after waiting a few moments, "I am waitin' to hear from ye."

"I was jest a-thinkin'," said the old ranger, slowly, as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, "I was jest a-thinkin' what this kentry is a-comin' to. As man an' boy I have trod these hills fer many a year, an' no man ever afore held me up in this way an' demanded ter know whar I was goin' an' what I was goin' fer. I have been tackled by road-agent gentry, but it strikes me that you ain't one o' that sort. Who be ye? an' what d'ye stop me fur?"

"I ain't put here ter answer questions," was the short retort, "but ter ask 'em. You want ter answer right up sharp, too, or else turn face about an' git. You hear me twitter?"

"An' what if I don't?"

"Somethin' will drop."

"Well, this beats my time," the old ranger ejaculated. "When th' Rockies ain't free no more, it is about time that old Zeb Horn passed in his chips an' got out. You say ye want ter know what I am doin' here an' whar I am goin'; is that it?"

"That is about what I am waitin' ter hear."

"Wal, whar I am goin' is ter th' camp o' Button-hole, as it uster be called; an' what I am doin' here is explained by th' fact that I'm on my way ter Button-hole, whar I'm goin'. Is that all?"

"That is all. An' now you will have ter turn right about an' go around an' take th' main trail. Nobody ain't allowed ter cross over this way."

"Can't go this way, eh?" indicating the broad way that led down and around among the rocks.

"No."

"Nor nuther that way, eh?" with a jerk of the thumb in the direction the mule had started.

"No, nor nuther that way. You'll have ter face right about an' go back th' way ye kem, an' so work around. Now don't let's have no palaver about it, but git."

"There is one question that I would like ter ask," Riddles parleyed, "an' that is— Why is this thus? What is th' reason that a free-born

American citizen can't come an' go where he pleases? That is what I am dyin' ter know jest now."

"If ye're dyin' ter know it I reckon ye'll have ter die, fer I won't tell ye. Th' cold fact of it is that you can't go to Rudbury this way, an' that settles it."

"Wal," said Riddles, "a blind man could see that you have got th' best of th' argymint, an' so I reckon I'll have ter put up with yer orders fer this time. Don't you be surprised, though, if ye see a tall, lean, lank ghost of about my size meanderin' around inside yer corral some o' these days. Come, Nap, an' Polly Ann, we'll be goin'."

"A ghost is what you certainly will be, if you come foolin' around here," was the bold assurance, "so if you are wise you will keep away. Be off, now, an' don't waste no more time about it."

It was a dose of medicine which the free old mountain-man did not relish, being thus balked and ordered about, but he took it with as good grace as possible, resolving in his mind that there would come a day for him later on."

He went forward to where the mule was standing, turned it around, mounted it, and said to his chance companion:

"Come, feller pardner, git onto yer wheel-critter an' we'll be goin'. If I stay around heur a minnit longer I know thar will be trouble, an' that is not jest what I am lookin' fer at present. Come on, dog."

With this the old ranger started off, the dog following at the heels of the mule, and the young man, having mounted his bicycle, brought up the rear.

"See that you don't come this way ag'in," the sentinel called out after them.

"I can't answer fer my stranger pardner," retorted Old Riddles, "but I want ter tell ye ter look fer a feller o' my size. It is jest as like as not that I will come pokin' around some day. Look out fer me."

"It won't be healthy fer ye if ye do."

Old Zeb made no further response, and the peculiar tetrad made their way down the sloping trail in the direction whence they had come.

Riddles sat on the mule as though in deep study, and the young man did not venture to break the silence.

Presently the old ranger abruptly asked:

"Youngster, what's yer name?"

"My name, eh?" the wheelman repeated, the suddenness of the question having startled him a little, "my name is Random Pepperly."

"Wal, that is a peculiar handle, I must say. Mine is Zeb Horn, which may sound jest as peculiar ter you. It is an honest name, howsumever, an' belongs to an honest man, an' therefore I ain't 'shamed of it. Whar d'ye hail from?"

"I come from England, if that is what you mean, sir."

"From England, eh? Wal, now, ter be honest with ye, young man, I don't like Britishers, an' allus did. I have hearn tell that my granddad died with a British bullet in his intarnal regions' somewhar, an' that sets me ag'in 'em bad. But, bless ye, we waxed 'em jest th' same, an' I don't suppose that is any reason why I should hold any grudge ag'in' you."

"I should hope not, sir."

"No, of course not; but at th' same time I can't say that I could strike up an undyin' love an' affection fer ye, ner take ye inter pardnership. I'll tell ye what I will do, howsumever."

"What is that?"

"I won't dezzart ye till I see ye out on th' right trail an' headed fer Button-hole, or whatever it is ye call it now."

"Thank ye, sir. I shall feel greatly obliged to you if you will do that. It is pretty certain to me that I am lost, and the prospect of having to stay out all night with nothing to eat is not pleasant."

"I should say so. How long have you been at Button-hole?"

"You mean Rudbury? I have been there about two weeks now."

"Two weeks, eh? That ain't very long, but mebbey you have heard tell o' him, if he is around. Have ye seen or heard tell of a feller critter that looks somethin' like me in th' matter o' dress, though he ain't quite as good-lookin' otherwise? He is purty long in th' legs, an' his handle is Sweetwater Saul. Have ye heard o' him?"

"No, I am pretty sure that I have not."

"That is bad, but then it don't count fer much, seein' that you are a stranger. Come this way, now, an' I guess we will soon find our way around to another old trail that I uster know about."

As he said this the old ranger turned off sharp to the right, down a very narrow natural path that led away in that direction, and the young man, dismounting from his bicycle, followed him.

"I think th' mule beats th' wheel," the ranger commented, as he noticed this, "fer I have observed that a mule kin go a'most anywhere that a man kin go. Hang me if I would own one of th' pesky things, though. Much less would resk my neck on that two-wheeled jigger. I don't

see how ye make it stand up, anyhow, at th' best o' times."

Thus for two hours their conversation ran on, and at the end of that time they came out upon an old trail.

"Heur we be," said Old Riddles, "an' it would 'a' paid me if I had come around this way in th' fu'st place; but I thought I would take a short cut an' save time. Now, Mister Pepperly, if you head yer critter right on in this direction, an' keep it headed that way, you will sooner or later come out at Button-hole, or Jigbury, as they now call it."

"Rudbury, Mr. Horn."

"Oh, well, a letter or two out o' plumb don't matter so long as ye git on ter what I mean. Now you kin go right on, fer it may be a day or two later afore I put in my 'pearance thar."

"Why, I thought you were going there to-day?"

"So I was, but I have changed my mind. You kin tell th' folks that I am comin', if anybody asks after me."

The young man expressed his disappointment in not having the old ranger's company all the way, and made many inquiries in order to be sure of his road, all of which the old man answered willingly enough, but at the same time urging him off.

Riddles was peculiar, to say the least.

"Thar, Nap," he observed to his dog, when the young Englishman had gone and was out of sight, "now we kin breathe free an' do a little private thinkin'. That feller is as harmless as a kitten, but he ain't our kind. We have done th' square thing by him in showin' him th' road as near as we could, accordin' ter th' way this new Book o' ours tells us ter do to others as we'd like ter have 'em do ter us; an' now th' case is off o' our hands. Now we'll go right back th' way we have come, an' as we go along I'll keep my thinker a-goin', an' when we stop I'll onwind myself ter you an' th' mule. I don't reckon there's much use doin' that ter Polly Ann, howsumever, but I won't forget ter consult with you. Now, mule, forward. Come on, dog."

The old tramp had turned the mule while talking thus, and now started back the way he had just come.

He was watched. Not far away, at a place where the other trail took a turn, standing on a higher portion of the rock to which he had climbed, was his late companion, the young Englishman with the bicycle. He had a field-glass in hand, and it was aimed direct at the old ranger and his mule.

"A hard old nut," he reflected, "and one who is no stranger to this part of the country. I tried to draw him out by playing the fool with him, but I did not learn a great deal. A good-natured old fellow, too, and obliging. He came all this distance to set me right on my way, and now he is going back. It will be well not to let him get inside the line. The word must be passed along for the men to look out for him."

The ranger was soon out of sight, and then the young man got down from the rock, put his glass away in a pocket that was attached to the seat of his bicycle, got upon the machine and rolled away in the direction of Rudbury.

Two hours later he was in the office of the Rudburys.

Here was something passing strange, and it would have given Old Riddles food for reflection had he known of it. As he could not, he went on his way happy in his ignorance of the matter, thinking he had rendered a fellow-creature a service, and the young man and his bicycle were soon out of his mind.

Back over the same ground he went, until he came to the place where the other trail had been departed from. There he turned to the south. Continuing on for some distance then, he finally came to another wild path, this time on the left, and turning into that he was soon winding his way down into a deep canyon.

Half an hour later he came to an abrupt halt. Here the way divided, away down there in the canyon, and on the rock before him, where the light fell upon it, was this startling notice, painted in black:

"The road to —"

CHAPTER VII.

RIDDLES IN TROUBLE.

"WHOA! whoa, Polly Ann! why in blazes don't ye whoa?" the old mountain-man cried, the instant his eye fell upon that unique notice, and he fell back upon the reins with all his strength, bringing the hybrid to a quick stop.

Then he surveyed the notice at his leisure.

"Napoleon, old dog," he presently observed, "I reckon we've struck th' trail. Here is a notice that says this is th' road to that plutonic region that Saul mentioned in his billy-duke. Plutonic is th' word, I guess; 'pears ter me I have heard it used in that sense afore. No matter, you understand what I mean."

The dog whined and wagged its tail, showing that it knew when it was addressed, if nothing more.

"Of course ye understand," the old ranger went on. "That is ter say ye understand what I am sayin', but I hardly think ye understand all about this rather startlin' guide-post, if I might

call it sich. So, this is th' road ter th' unfrozen kentry down below, is it? I wouldn't 'a' thought it. I had an idee that it was furdur south, more handy to th' Apaches, Greasers, an' sich. I have no doubt there is more roads leadin' the same way, howsumever."

He was silent for some time, busy with his thoughts.

There the sign was, just as it has been set forth, only a little more bold. What did it mean? Surely it had some meaning, else why should it have been put there? And who had painted it there? Let us see what the old ranger's speculations were concerning it.

"Thar it is, plain as print kin make it," he reflected, "but, how did it come thar? an' who put it thar? An' further, what was it put thar fur, an' whyfor? Come, Nap!" aloud, "what is your opine about it? Speak right up, thar's a good dog, an' let me have th' benefit o' your reasonin'."

"Don't it strike ye, old dog, that there is a good deal o' sameness atween this sign an' lots of other ones we see heurabouts, sich as 'Dosems Pills for Bilious Complaints,' 'Strongman's Cast-iron Bitters,' an' sich like? I mean in th' form an' make-up of th' letters, an' so forth; not in th' wordin', though there might be some sameness there, too, if any one would study it out."

"I think there is somethin' in this reasonin', Nap, an' it runs inter my mind that this has been painted here by one o' them painter vagabonds that is defacin' th' toppey-graffy of th' hull kentry. Why, out East thar, as you will remember, Nap, th' hull land is one immense sign-board. They go so fur as ter paint medicine-signs on th' graveyard fences, as you an' me seen more'n once. That is goin' purty fur, too, an' hang me if I know whether it's hardest on th' medicine or on th' graveyard."

"Howsumever that may be, it don't alter th' facks in this case. Here is th' sign, an' I reckon that is a purty close guess as ter how it kem here. Th' next p'int is, why did he put it here? Mebbey he has been there, an' has some personal knowledge about th' matter. What d'ye think o' that, dog? But, I reckon we kin come closer than that. This canyon is a dismal hole, an' it is likely th' feller got lost in it. When he got out ter this p'int, he jest stopped an' slapped up that sign, ter give 'spression ter his feelin's on th' matter, an' ter warn others away; fer it ain't reasonable ter suppose that anybody really wants ter go ter that stronghold of th' devourin' element. There's reason in that, don't ye think so, dog?"

"Ag'in," the old man went on, after the pause of a moment, "if this is really th' true history of th' thing, there is yet another p'int ter be brought ter mind. Th' notice we found on th' door of our wigwam, when we kem back from th' East, went on ter inform us that our friend an' old-time pardner, Sweetwater Saul, was about ter set out fer th' place here mentioned. Now, is there any connection atween th' two? Did Saul put this up here? No, that ain't likely, fer he ain't no painter, an' he wouldn't have th' paint ter do it with. That seems ter settle that."

"Lastly, it is only guess-work with us anyhow. I know you are fond o' riddles, old dog, an' so be I; but at th' same time we like ter have th' answers in th' book along with 'em. Th' answer ter this one don't appear. What follers? Th' plain facks is these: Saul said he was goin' ter that suffocatin' clime, an' wanted us ter j'ine him. We have kem here ter do it, though I reckon we're a long while too late. We nat'rally wanted ter strike th' trail, an' here it seems ter be. We'll go ter that broilin'-place, Nap, if it costs us a leg. Come on."

And on they started.

Turning to the right, the way the hand on the painted guide-post indicated, they made their way along the dark and narrow branch of the canyon, going gradually lower and lower as they advanced.

This was the first time Old Riddles had been in the place, as his "stamping-ground" lay further to the south, as we know, and here he was not so well acquainted with the face of the country in detail.

It grew darker as he advanced, the defile being almost closed overhead in many places, and when he had gone what seemed to him to be a mile, the trail, if it may be spoken of as such, had still a downward tendency.

"I tell ye what it is, Nap," the old fellow finally ejaculated, confidentially, "I begin ter think that sign back thar on th' rocks wa'n't fur wrong. If we keep on goin' down, we're bound ter bring up in some onwholesome spot, you kin bet heavy on it. Nevertheless, we'll keep on an' see what comes of it."

They continued on slowly, the old investigator keeping his eyes well open and on the alert, not having confidence enough in the mule to trust altogether to its sagacity and sure-footedness, but wanting to know something of the nature of the ground that lay ahead.

There might, for all he could tell, be a yawning, hungry chasm the next step forward, and if there should be anything of the sort he wanted to know it in due time.

And in this way they continued for some distance further.

Suddenly the mule came to a stop. His rider had been watching closely, as he thought, and he saw nothing to forbid further progress. His eyes had been fixed upon the ground just ahead, however, and as he raised them he was startled at what he beheld.

Just ahead was a space of utter blackness. It looked as though the world ended right here, and all beyond was simply one deep, black void.

For an instant the veteran mountaineer felt a chill creep over him.

"Great goodness! where have we kem to?" he exclaimed, in an undertone. "What sort o' kingdom of nowhar is that? If I was right in my guess about how that sign kem ter be painted on th' rocks back thar, I don't wonder at all at th' feller's puttin' it thar. Reckon he couldn't hit a better name fer th' place ahead. Wonder if Saul ever knowed o' this spot. He didn't in my day with him in this region, that is sartain."

The old ranger slipped from the back of the mule to the ground, and looked around for his dog.

"Oh, thar ye be, be ye, Nap? Wal, now, see here; I want you ter stay right here an' keep yer eye onter this kickin'-machine—this mule, I mean, while I go on ahead a little ways an' see what thar is ter be seen. An' I reckon I can't see much, nuther; but what I can't see I kin feel, if there is any feel to it. Now you stay here an' watch th' mule, an' don't you open yer head unless I want ye, an' then ye needn't open it, but come. Now, mind what I tell ye, an' don't ye let this critter git away."

As he concluded giving his orders the old man took the rein and placed it in the dog's mouth, and patting the faithful brute on the head, affectionately, turned and went on afoot toward the region of blackness ahead.

It grew darker as he advanced, and ere long it was totally dark. Not a ray of light was to be seen in any direction, except a faint streak in the quarter from which he had come.

He knew he had entered a cavern, but of what extent it was he could not tell. He would learn.

He had been following the right wall of the dark canyon, taking every step with the utmost care, and now, in order to learn its width he left the wall and started directly across, using the same caution.

But he had not far to go. Only two steps did he take, and then he brought up against the opposite wall.

"It ain't purty wide yet," he muttered. "I'll forge ahead a ways, an' then I'll try an' strike up a light an' look around. Wish I had a torch, I'd light that."

Returning to the right-hand wall, he touched it with his hand, and keeping it within reach, pushed slowly and carefully on.

In a little while the air began to feel decidedly cold, like the air in an ice-house on a summer day, and had the old ranger known it, this was a sign that the cavern was coming larger as he went.

He did not reason that way, perhaps, but he reasoned another.

"I smell water," he muttered, "an' live water an' lots of it, too. I want ter be keeful as I push along, or I may be gittin' inter a tarnel fix o' onpleasantness. Reckon mebbe I'd better call a halt an' strike a match an' take—"

He did not finish the sentence. He stepped upon something very slippery, his heels shot out from under him, and he sat down.

Nor was that all. He found himself upon a slanting rocky floor, and before he could offer any resistance, or catch hold of anything to stay himself, he was sliding downward at a rapid rate.

A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind, none of them of a very cheering character, but they could not blot out his grim sense of humor that was bound to be uppermost on every occasion, no matter how great the danger. He might be falling into a bottomless chasm, to be dashed into a thousand pieces in the descent, for aught he knew, and indeed that was already in mind; but even that did not stop the reflection:

"Well, heur I go. I have hearn tell that th' road to th' internal tropics is easy travelin', but I had no idee that a feller could be whooped along at this rate. Good-by, Nap, and good-by, mule; I hope ye won't be so foolish as ter stay thar till ye starve—"

"Swshh!"

He had plunged feet first into a body of water, and he went right under.

The old ranger was certainly in a dilemma now, and it was fortunate for him that he could swim.

He had dropped his rifle when he had at first slipped, and had not that to impede him, and as soon as he stopped going down he struck out for the surface. In a moment or two he had his nose out into the air.

"Ugh! but it is cold!" he exclaimed, his teeth chattering, "but it is a heap better'n fallin' inter a bottomless pit all mangled up inter sausage-meat; oh, goodness, yes! I kin swim a little, an' there is some hope o' my gettin' out o' here if I kin only find a place ter land. Wonder which way I wantter go."

Swimming with sturdy strokes, he presently

came to a point where his hands came in contact with the rocks, and he then soon found a place where he could hold fast. His hold secured, he let his feet down, and was agreeably surprised to find that the water was only up to his waist, and that there was a solid footing under him.

He began at once to plan some means of getting out, and was about to call to his dog when he caught the gleam of a light across the water, and a moment later heard voices coming toward the place where he was.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE NICK OF TIME.

"CONSARN my old picter," the old ranger half muttered, "but this is about as bad a state o' pickle as old Zeb Horn ever got inter, an' no onsartainity about that. Hang me if it ain't ruther cold. I'd like ter know fer sure whether them critters that is comin' is friends or foes, fer it would be a bad joke ter holler fer help an' then find that ye had put yer foot inter it. No, that won't do at all; I'll have ter grin an' bear it until they show their colors."

He was indeed in a bad fix. The place had been densely dark at first, but now, as the coming lights approached, the outline of the jagged rocky walls began to stand out, and the old ranger could take his bearing.

He found that he was under a ledge of rock, apparently on the opposite side from where he had first fallen into the water. On that side a deep, black rent was to be seen in the wall, as the lights came nearer. Evidently, that was the way he had come. The wall stretched upward higher than it could be seen, and it seemed as though a whole great mountain had been hollowed out to make this cavern.

The water was about twenty feet across, and stretched away in two directions as far as could be seen by the dim light. And it appeared to be running.

Old Zeb noted all this, and much more, as the men bearing the lights came on: and he set his face toward the dark opening on the other side of the water, in order to be sure of his direction, to swim across as soon as the men had passed.

But the men did not pass. When they came to a point immediately above the spot where the old ranger was, they stopped. Then he heard them talking.

He listened attentively to catch their words, but it took only a moment to discover that he did not understand the language they were using.

"What sort o' talk, in th' name o' goodness, is that?" he questioned. "I thought I knowed a smatterin' o' almost everything that was ever heerd in th' Rockies, but hang me if I know any o' this lingo. I wish I was around where I could git a look at 'em. Mebbe if I was, though, they could git a look at me at th' same time, an' that might be onpleasant."

The water was now well lighted up beyond the shadow of the rock overhead, and the shadows of moving figures were to be seen. These attracted the old man's eye, and he tried to study them. There were as many as ten persons, at least, and at least four torches.

With so many lights, the shadows were rather confusing, as may be imagined, and the ranger could make out little or nothing of their movements. Some of them seemed to be stooping, but what they were doing he could not make out.

Presently, however, there was something that he could understand. Those who held the torches stood near together for a moment, and shadows for the time were less confusing. He saw that five or six of the men had lifted something up, and were holding it as if making ready to throw it into the water. And that something had the appearance of being a man.

Their talking had nearly ceased, and now Old Riddles heard them stepping to the edge of the rock above his head. Now the shadow was stronger. They certainly held the body of a human being, and were about to consign it to the dark waters.

"What in th' merry dickens be they up to?" the old ranger questioned. "Is this th' way they have o' disposin' o' their dead? I reckon I am stuck fer once. Have I really reached that sulphurous zone? By th' feel o' this water I don't think I have. I have hearn tell that they don't have any dead there, an' this must be a live victim. There is somethin' rotten, whatever is goin' on, an' that is one of th' things that kin be set down as sartain. We'll see what comes of it all, old pardner," addressing himself, as was his wont.

Old Zeb had not long to wait. The men poised their victim among them for a moment, as the shadows told, and then gave it a toss outward, and down it came into the water, with a loud splash.

It was all over, so far as they were concerned, be it a simple burial, a crime, or whatever it might.

They stood for a few seconds, watching the place where the waters had closed over the body, and then talking among themselves in their peculiar language, they turned and started back the way they had come.

In the mean time, almost as soon as they had

thrown the body into the water, the old ranger felt it strike against his legs.

"Great goblins!" he came very near exclaiming aloud, "but this is onpleasant, ter have a defunct feller-critter bobbin' around yer legs. Mebbe he ain't a corpus yet, though," was the thought of the next instant, and stooping down he laid hold of the man by the collar and drew his head above the surface.

"Alive, by mighty!" he exclaimed in thought, as his cold hand came in contact with warm flesh. "This is a rotten game o' murder, or it would 'a' been if I hadn't happened ter been heur. 'Can't tell me there ain't nothin' in th' hand o' Providence in sich matters."

The man had been under the water only a few brief seconds at most, and was very much alive, but being bound hand and foot, he could not make much of a display of his powers, and a gag in his mouth prevented him from using his tongue.

Old Riddles continued to hold his head above the water, waiting in silence for the would-be murderers to get out of hearing before he did anything further.

When at last the light had disappeared from sight, and the men could no longer be heard, he raised their victim up further out of the water, saying:

"Now, feller-critter, I'll ondo yer talk-trap, an' hear what ye've got ter say about it. Great Goshen! but you are long in th' legs. Can't ye stand on yer pins? I s'pose yer feet is tied, but that hadn't orter hinder ye from standin'. There, that is it; now I'll open yer grub-chopper."

Having got the man balanced upon his feet, the old ranger proceeded to untie the gag, making all the haste his benumbed fingers were capable of.

After a little time the task was accomplished, and no sooner was the gag removed than the man exclaimed:

"Old Zeb Horn, you tarnel old fraud! allow me ter say much obliged ter you fer this leetle sarvice. Jest ondo my flippers an' I'll grasp yer hand."

"Howlin' tornaders!" the old tramp exclaimed, "if it ain't my old-time pardner, Sweetwater Saul!"

"It sartainly is, old feller, so ye ain't fur wrong in yer guess. But, come, let's git out o' this mighty cold water an' then we'll have a talk. I'm 'most dead."

It was a strange meeting.

"You ain't as near dead as you would be if th' hand o' Prov. hadn't sent me heur ter fish ye out," commented Old Riddles. "You would been a goner by this time. An' I ain't right sartain that we are out o' th' woods yet. Kin ye do any swimmin'?"

"Wal, no, I ain't o' much 'count on th' swim, but I kin do a tolerable streak at wadin'. You'll have ter help me loosen my feet, though, or I won't be any good at that."

Old Riddles had already freed his hands, and now set to work to do the same for his feet. This was not so easy. By Saul's taking hold of the rock and drawing himself up, however, and Riddles's reaching down with his knife and feeling for the cords that bound him, it was presently accomplished.

"So fur so good," said Riddles, then, "an' now th' most important thing on th' bill is, as you said, ter git out o' this cold bath. I'll call th' dog."

So saying, the old ranger gave a short, sharp whistle. In a moment the answer, a sharp, single bark, was heard, and in a little while the dog was heard whining on the other side of the water.

"Come on, Nap, come right on," Old Riddles directed; "jump right in an' come on. You'll find us heur, old feller."

A splash was heard, and soon the faithful old dog was at its master's side.

"Good dog, Nap, good dog," the old man complimented, "mighty good dog. This feller heur is our old pardner, Sweetwater Saul, th' man what set out fer th' tropics, as he said in his billy-duke; an' I reckon he's been thar. Speak ter th' dog, Saul, so's he'll know ye. Thar, that's it; an' now you put one hand on him an' one on me, an' we'll make a start. You kin wade as long as yer head will float, an' when it won't, then jest hang on fer all ye're wu'th. Be ye ready?"

Sweetwater announced that he was, and they started.

It was now dark as it could be, and they were in a dangerous fix. If they failed to find the right landing-place, or any other, the length of their lives was measured by the length of time they would be able to keep swimming.

They had taken but two or three steps when they "felt the bottom drop out from under them," as Saul afterward expressed it, and then Riddles and the dog had work to do. Both put forth their best efforts, as indeed they had to do to carry the burden that was upon them, and Riddles allowed the dog to play the role of guide.

But they crossed safely, and when they touched the rocks, were fortunate enough to find a good hold for their hands.

They had not come to the exact place where

Old Riddles had fallen in, but on the other side of the dark passageway, and there the rock was rougher and the slope not so sharp.

"I reckon we've arrove," remarked Riddles, "an' now, Saul, as you are th' longest in th' legs an' th' shortest in th' swim, you climb out fu'st."

"I don't mind if I do," Sweetwater Saul responded, "fer this is about th' coldest bath I ever was in."

Reaching up, he got another hold, and then with the aid of Old Riddles, soon managed to drag himself out of the water. The next to follow was the dog, and then the Rocky ranger, with the help of his timely-found friend, followed their example.

"Now, Zeb," said Saul, when they had reached the level of the rock floor of the passage, "allow me ter shake ag'in. Only fer you I'd been a dead dog by this time. How kem you thar?"

"Don't stop ter ax me any questions now," Riddles cut him off, "but let's git away from here an' dry ourselves fu'st. Thar'll be plenty o' time fer that. Jest be glad that I was thar. Say, Nap, whar's my gun?"

The dog whined, and Riddles, stepping to where it was, stooped and picked up the lost weapon.

"Good dog, mighty good dog," its master exclaimed. "I wouldn't trade that dog fer all th' Polly Anns in th' kentry, Saul."

"Jest what I am dyin' ter ask ye," returned Saul; "have ye seen anything o' that leetle mule o' mine?"

"I reckon I have," was the welcomed assurance. "She kem away down ter my part o' th' kentry an' toted me up heur ter save yer wu'th-less old life, you old fraud, you."

"Did my Polly Ann do that?"

"She did fer a fact."

"Then you kin boast o' yer dorg all ye want ter, ye old rascal, ye, but I wouldn't trade that mule fer a thousan' like him."

So they talked on, quarreling good-naturedly the whole distance, as they made their way out to where Old Riddles had left the mule.

CHAPTER IX.

SWEETWATER SAUL'S STORY.

WHEN the trio came to the place where the mule had been left, that faithful brute was still there, and Sweetwater Saul hastened to it, put his arms around its neck, and kissed it affectionately.

"Polly! Polly!" he cried, "how have you been? I thought you an' me had seen each other fer th' last time, but it seems it wasn't so ter be. I am most mighty glad ter see you, though I can't hardly see you, nuther, in this dark hole; but you know what I mean."

The mule seemed to recognize its master, and to be as well pleased as he was at the meeting.

"Sweetwater Saul," admonished Old Riddles, "I am disgusted with ye, I am indeed. Th' idee of any human critter kissin' a mule. You make me feel sick."

"Now you shut right up, you old humbug, you," retorted Saul. "I have seen you rub noses with that homely dorg o' yourn more'n once, an' you can't deny it."

"An' who wants ter deny it?" the Rocky ranger demanded. "If you had a dog like Napoleon it would be wu'th yer while ter make a fuss over him; but ter take on so over a homely critter of a mule—Bah!"

"That critter wa'n't too homely ter carry you three hundred miles an' better, was she?" in a tone that was more of exclamatory than interrogative.

"Oh! she is a good leetle mule as mules go," acknowledged Riddles, "but you are overdoin' th' matter. If that mule had half th' hoss sense my dog has got—"

"If she ain't got no more, I'll trade her off fer a dog better'n yourn, an' then shoot th' dog."

So they kept it up for some time. This had been a bone of contention between them during their former partnership, and it was likely to be renewed now. Not that they seriously quarreled, far from it; but any one to hear them would think that at any moment they might be expected to come to blows.

When they had said about all they had to say on that head, they continued on their way out of the narrow pass, and in due time came to the point where was the wonderful sign that had been the means of saving Sweetwater Saul's life, inasmuch as it had taken Old Riddles into the cavern at the very opportune moment.

By this time it was night, and overhead the stars were to be seen in countless number.

Both the men were shivering with cold, and gradually they lapsed into semi-silence.

They pressed on, and finally came out upon the trail where we first saw Old Riddles late in the forenoon. There they stopped.

"I reckon we're both o' one mind, same as we us'ter be of old, eh?" Riddles remarked, as they made the stop.

"I reckon we be," responded Saul.

"About where ter stop fer th' night?"

"Exactly."

"An' we are of th' mind that if we git a leetle

further away from this vicinity o' neighborhood it won't do no harm."

"Them is it exactly. It ain't none too safe around here, that I kin tell ye. We ain't more'n a thousan' miles from th' kentry o' hot weather."

"I should say it wasn't safe, ter judge by what I have seen of it so far, an' we'll push right on. Come on, dog."

On they went, and little more was said.

At the end of an hour they came to a halt, having arrived at a place where they mutually agreed without a spoken word would be a good spot for them to camp.

"Thank goodness we're heur," ejaculated Old Riddles, "fer I am about tuckered out. Now fer a fire, jest as quick as we kin make one."

There was plenty of wood lying around, they having stopped in a sort of gully that evidently saw an occasional freshet, as the driftwood plainly told, and Old Riddles proceeded to unpack the mule, in quest of matches.

Both men were still wet to the skin, of course, but their exercise had warmed them a little, and they were slightly less uncomfortable than they had been at first.

Saul collected wood while Riddles looked for matches, and in a short time a cheering fire was blazing.

And now for a look at Sweetwater Saul, to learn what manner of man he was, as seen in the light of the fire.

To begin with, he was very tall, being not less than six-feet-four. And he was thin and gaunt-looking—more so than was natural with him. He had a dark face, with a full black beard, and was better-looking than Old Riddles. In the matter and manner of dress the two men were not unlike.

They talked but little yet, but busied themselves with the work of making comfort the first order of duty. Riddles brought forth some food, though it was not a great store of that needful article, and Saul having procured enough wood to last some time, they sat down to eat, talk, and dry their garments.

"Now," invited Riddles, "onwind yerself."

"You first," amended Saul.

And so it was arranged. Riddles went ahead and told all that is known to the reader about himself; of his marriage and life in the East, of the death of his wife, of his return to the West, of his finding the note, then the mule, and brought the narration down to the then present hour. He was frequently interrupted, and especially when he told about his wedded life.

"You married!" exclaimed Saul, when that part of the story was reached, "you! a homely old dog-faced baboon like you! Th' female woman that would marry you must 'a' been blind, an' no question about that. I'd like ter see her."

"You would 'a' seen a jewel," averred the old man. "She wa'n't no shakes on beauty herself, an' so she couldn't quarrel much with me on that line, but fer solid hoss sense she tipped th' beam. An' as fer her heart, that was a scild lump o' pure gold, Saul, I swear it was."

This was not said without emotion, and Sweetwater Saul saw that his old-time friend indeed had a deep wound in his honest old heart, and he respected it.

When Old Riddles finally reached the end of his narrative, he concluded with saying:

"Thar it is, th' hull tale; an' now let's hear from you."

"Truth is stranger than fiction, by mighty!" exclaimed Sweetwater Saul. "If I didn't know ye as well as I do, Zeb, I'd call ye a royal liar. Why, you uster be as shy o' wimmin as—as—I can't think of anything ter lustrate jest how shy you was o' wimmin, but you was awful shy. Still you got married, an' that is why I say truth is stranger than fiction."

"An' now you want my own story."

"That is what I am waitin' ter hear, Saul," the Rocky ranger urged; "an' fu'st of all I'd like ter know if ye really went ter that brim-stony locality that ye spoke of in yer notice on th' cabin door."

"That I did, Zeb," was the assurance, "but I didn't succeed in gettin' inter th' master-devil's headquarters. We'll try it ag'in, though, I hope, now that you are here an' I am alive."

"I reckon it's resky, from what I've seen, but we'll see about that. Now fer yer yarn."

"Resky! that ain't no name fer it. You seen how they sarved me. An' did ye git a sight o' th' devils?"

"No, I only seen their shadders."

"Wal, that was quite enough fer th' fu'st. When ye come ter see th' substance of 'em it will startle ye."

"But, give me yer story."

"Yes, ter be sure. Not that I feel a heap like talkin', fer I don't. I have been on short rations fer a long time, an' I'd a heap rather eat than do anything else that I kin think of, but I know you are dyin' ter hear from me, so here goes."

"About sev'ral years ago, ter go right back an' take a good start, there kem ter this part of th' kentry a feller ter buy a slice o' ground. He fooled around fer some time, and finally bought a chunk o' this wild region, includin' th' town o' Button-hole. What he intended ter do with it

we couldn't guess, an' he didn't give us no time ter ax questions, fer as soon as he could read his title clear he picked up an' got right out an' wasn't seen ag'in."

"Things went right on in th' same old way, an' that feller was about forgot, when one day a Britisher swooped down upon th' town with a lot o' tan-colored heathen at his heels, an' declared that he was th' owner o' th' burg. An' so it was. Th' man what had bought th' place had been only his agent."

"But," interrupted Old Riddles, "what has all this got ter do with your goin' ter that seethin' pit you spoke about?"

"I'm comin' ter that right away. I mention these facts ter set th' hull thing afore ye. Now them copper-headed varmint that I spoke about couldn't talk a word of United States, but had a gibber of their own that th' Britisher an' his son could understand. In my opine they are nothin' more nor less than slaves."

"Well, the Britisher took right holt o' th' town, an' everybody had ter git up an' git out, or else pay big rent fer their places, an' most of 'em got. Thar was one man that didn't git, though, an' that was one Checkerin', who had a claim in th' tract that the Britisher couldn't git over. He stayed right thar, an' in my opine he is goin' ter stay. I am proud ter say he is pure American. I have another idee, howsumdover, that there is ter be trouble ahead fer him yet if th' Britisher kin make it."

"Thar, now, don't interrupt me, Riddles, fer I am comin' ter th' p'int now. 'Most everybody got out, as I said, an' then th' Britisher an' his son opened one of th' old mines an' went ter minin', usin' them jack-rabbit heathen ter do th' work. Then they put up a big hotel, built a fine house, an' set th' town ter boomin'."

"Purty soon somethin' mighty strange was noticed. We fellers that tramped around in th' Hills more or less, found a circle o' kentry off to the southwest of th' town that was bein' guarded, an' nobody was allowed ter cross it. There was a line o' armed men around it like th' picket-line of a reg'lar army, an' in order ter reach th' town from that direction we had ter come away around ter th' north. Th' attention of th' Britisher was called to it, an' he owned up that it was done by his orders ter keep off prospectors. Said he didn't want nobody meddlin' around there. That was all right, but when we th' citizens o' th' town wanted him ter give us a pass-word, he refused ter do that. That made it look a leetle queer, ter say th' least."

"Now I had never done much explorin' around thar, bein' too lazy ter do th' necessary climbin', I reckon, but I made up my mind ter know what was goin' on. I set out, an' th' first day I found somethin' startlin'. I kem to a place whar there was a sign posted up sayin' that that was th' road ter th' region below. I took that trail, an' kem out at th' place whar th' water is, whar you rescued me. Thar was plenty o' light thar then, an' them heathens o' Rudbury's was havin' some sort o' heathen dance on th' broad ledge jest across th' water, an' they looked like real devils, I should imagine. Each feller had a torch, an' they made the night hideous with their howlin's."

"I had anchored th' mule funder back along th' narrer pass, an' I jest lay there an' watched their hull proceedin's. They kept up their devil-dance fer a long time, an' then they dragged out a dead man of their own kin an' color, an' when they had done some dancin' around him they poured pitch an' oil over th' body, set fire to it, an' when it was burnin' well, shoved it off inter th' water with th' most infernal howlin's ye ever heard."

CHAPTER X.

TAKING IN A LODGER.

OLD RIDDLES had listened to the narration with rapt attention.

He was deeply interested.

"I should say that you thought you had really reached that caloric clime," he ventured to observe.

"If you mean that I thought I had reached th' hot hole below, you are right. Anyhow, I thought I must be gittin' in a vicinity o' nearness to it."

"Well, go right on an' give me th' rest of th' story."

"I would been goin' right on now, if you hadn't interrupted me."

"I didn't interrupt ye, ye long-legged galoot; ye stopped yerself. Go on, now, an' no foolin' about it."

"All right, have it yer own way, but don't do it ag'in. By th' way, what is that cur prickin' up its ears about?"

Riddles glanced at his dog, which was lifting its head and listening attentively, as though trying to make out some sound that had reached its sharp ears.

"Don't you call that dog a cur," the Rocky ranger protested, quickly. "If some human critters had half th' hoss sense that dog has got, they would have somethin' ter be proud of. I reckon he thinks he has heard somethin', an' wants ter make out what it is. That is more'n that old mule o' yourn could do. But, go on with yer story; Nap will give us warnin' if any danger is comin'."

"It is nothin' else but a cur," Sweetwater iterated, "an' you put entirely too much confidence inter it. You will git fooled some o' these days."

"You let me know when I do, you old rascal you, an' it will be my treat. Now if it was that fool of a mule o' yourn, you could have reason ter talk so of it. But, drop this, an' go on with yer yarn."

"I want you ter understand that that mule has got more sense in one ear than your dorg has got in its whole head, you old fraud. But we'll talk o' that later. Let me see, whar did I stop?"

"You had jest told about them p'izen critters settin' fire to th' body o' th' dead man an' drop-pin' it inter th' water."

"Yes, so I had. Well, after that they danced an' whooped it up fer a spell longer, and then they went off inter th' big cavern an' I see'd nothin' more o' 'em. I went back ter whar th' mule was, mounted it, an' set out fer th' south. Sez I to myself, sez I, this is a purty big piece o' rascally business, whatever is going on, an' I reckon I'll just run down an' ax that old fool of a Old Riddles to j'ine me in huntin' 'em out. So down I went, th' hull three hundred miles an' better, an' when I got thar you wa'n't at home. I knowed you had been away fer some time, an' knowed it wouldn't pay me ter set down thar an' wait fer ye; so I put up that notice you found on th' door, an' kem right back ag'in."

"When I got back I made up my mind ter try an' find out what was goin' on. I had never knowed that big cavern was there, an' I wanted ter explore that, anyhow. So I set out ter do it. I fooled around fer some time, an' one day, leavin' Polly Ann ter eat her fill in a grassy place, I got inside o' th' picket-line on foot."

"There I was, an' I wanted ter make th' best of it; but it wasn't long afore I was grabbed from ahind by two o' them tan-colored varmints, an' taken prisoner. I had an idee that no human critter could steal sich a march on me, but they done it, an' they done it slick, too. There ain't ary Injun equal to 'em. Well, they blindfolded me an' toted me away, an' when they allowed me to use my peepers ag'in I was away down under th' ground in a miserable little hole that wasn't long enough fer me ter stretch out in. An' there they kept me till ter-day, when they disposed of me in th' manner you witnessed. Say, that dog o' yourn does hear somethin', sure pop."

"I know he does," agreed Riddles, "fer I have got my eye on him. I don't notice that your old mule hears anything, though. We might be killed and chawed up if we had ter depend on that critter ter warn us. Mules is no good. But, is that all ye have ter tell?"

"Well, that is about all. I kin only add that there is somethin' goin' on down there in that infernal region that ain't jest accordin' ter law, an' that I am sure of. An' what is more, this Britisher, Lord Rudbury they calls him, is at th' bottom of it. What it is I can't tell, but I mean ter know, an' if you are wilkin' ter go inter th' thing with me, we'll make it out if it takes th' top off, as th' sayin' goes. What d'ye say to it?"

"I am with ye, Saul, heart an' hand. I want some sort o' excitement ter keep my thoughts busy, an' I have an idee we'll find it in this. Here is my hand on it."

Old Riddles reached out his hand as he spoke. Sweetwater Saul grasped it, and the two old rangers shook each other's arm to seal their compact.

While this conversation had been going on, and we have given merely an outline of it, the two men had kept up a hot fire, and had, by turning all sides to it, succeeded in drying their clothes.

They talked on, for, naturally, they had much to tell each other, and both were almost oblivious to everything else; when suddenly they were recalled to things present by a low growl from the dog.

"Hal th' dog is sure of somethin' now," Old Riddles exclaimed. "I knowed he had his ears cocked fer somethin' th' way he has been actin' fer the last space o' while. Git holt o' yer shooter, Saul, an' we'll git back inter th' shadders. I don't want ter git picked off without a show fer my life."

"Nuther do I," agreed Sweetwater, "but if there is any shootin' ter be done you will have ter do it. My irons is back there in that den o' iniquity whar I was held pris'ner."

"Yes, so they be. Well, never mind; if it comes to a case o' necessity, I guess my old rifle kin speak out fer both of us."

They quickly left the light of the fire and stepped back into the friendly shadow of some projecting rocks near by, and there awaited to learn what was the cause of the dog's uneasiness.

Both knew well enough that Napoleon was not the dog to give any false alarms.

They had not long to wait. After a few minutes a voice hailed them in the following words:

"Hello, there, neighbors, that fire of yours looks cheery, and if you are honest men I would like to join you and toast my shins a little. How is it?"

The voice came from among the rocks a little way to the south of where the camp-fire was blazing.

"Wal," returned Old Riddles, "it is about like this: Like gen'rally seeks th' company o' like, an' birds of a feather flock together; an' as you ar' on th' outlook fer honest men, we take it that you set up ter be on' that gender yerself."

"You have tapped me in the right place, sure as you live," came back the cheery response. "I am honestly refined, and if you will cal' off your dog, and promise not to plug me at sight, I will step forward and show myself."

"Come right along," was the invitation, "and let us have a look at ye. We reckon you are all right, but there is a good deal in th' face of a man ter jedge his character by. Let us have a look at yours, and we'll venture ter tell yer fortune. Come forth, as th' dentist said to th' tooth!"

"Behold, I come."

Old Riddles and Saul were on the watch, and in a moment they saw a man step out into the light of the fire.

The new-comer was a man of medium hight, of strong build, and was clad in an attire half civilization and half wild West. His face was covered with a beard that was evidently about a month old, though his mustache was longer, and that gave him a rather rough appearance, but his eyes were sharp and intelligent.

"Here I am," he announced, "and now where are you?"

"Here be we," responded the old rangers, and they too stepped out into the blaze of light.

The two parties then looked each other over before anything further was said on either side.

The new-comer was the first to speak.

"You are strangers to me," he said, "and I guess I am the same to you. That don't matter, however, for all persons are strangers before they meet. I like the looks of you two gentlemen well enough, and I hope that my impression upon you is not wholly unfavorable."

"I have seen wuss-lookin' men, lots o' times," declared Old Riddles, "an' we reckon you ain't any wuss'n you look."

"That is about it," supplemented Saul.

"Then you will allow me to share your fire for the night?"

"Yes, come forward an' toast."

"Thanks."

With this the stranger came forward and extended his hand to each of the old rangers in turn, and when they had shaken with him he sat down by the fire and began to talk.

"I was lost," he started by explaining, "and I would have been lost still had I not seen the light of your fire. Seeing that, I headed this way, and now I am found. I do not know where I am yet, however, but supposing that you do, I can no longer claim to be lost. I have had an afternoon and evening of adventure, and that not of an agreeable sort."

"Sich is ter be found in this part o' th' kentry," ventured Sweetwater.

"So it seems; but this was of rather a peculiar sort."

"What was it like?" inquired Riddles.

"Well, I will tell you. I set out this morning to go to the town of Rudbury, was directed on my way at a town some miles to the south of here, and would have made out all right, undoubtedly, had I been allowed to proceed. But I was not. I ran into a line of pickets, who allowed me to proceed no further; and try as I would I could not get through their line. Do you know anything about them?"

"We know just that much about them," answered Riddles, "but no more. What they are there for is a mystery. I have had th' same experience to-day, and so has my friend here, only more so. By th' way, what is yer name, stranger?"

"My name is Paul Richley. What is yours? if I may inquire."

"My cog is Zeb Horn, but I'm better known as Old Riddles; an' th' name of my pardner here is—"

"My name is Noah Brayton," Sweetwater Saul quickly interrupted, "and I am a brother to one Saul Brayton, better known as Sweetwater Saul, who belongs up in this part of th' kentry somewhar. That straight, Riddles?"

The old ranger "caught on" immediately to the idea his friend had of hiding his identity, and responded:

"That is straight, Noah."

After an hour's talk of little interest to our story, the stranger selected a place and stretched out to sleep, the others preparing to do the same.

"Is he ter be trusted?" inquired Sweetwater Saul, in a low whisper, as he and Old Riddles stepped aside for a moment, ostensibly to see that the mule was all right.

"We don't keer a tinker's objugation whether he is or not!" answered Riddles in the same tone. "I wanted ter tell ye not ter let that thought rob you of any sleep. Napoleon is heur, an' that feller won't so much as wiggle a toe afore th' dog will wake me up. That is more'n your mule could do."

Saul would have made answer to this, but the Rocky ranger waved him to be silent, and in a little time they were all asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

ELEMENTS OF DISCORD.

LET us come upon the scene at the close of a rather stormy interview.

It is in the home of Richard Checkering, in the town of Rudbury.

The participants are Mr. and Mrs. Checkering, and their daughter, Ermina is present.

It is on the same night of which the previous chapter treats.

The scene is in the handsomely-furnished sitting-room of the Checkering home, where the surroundings are such as would naturally suggest happiness and peace. But these are not always found, be the surroundings what they may. Wherever discord is present, peace is absent.

Richard Checkering is seated at a table, one arm lying across it, the fist clinched, and his face has an expression of sorrowful firmness and determination. His wife is pacing the floor, her face flushed with excitement and anger, and her eyes flashing. Their daughter is sitting on a sofa at the furthest end of the room, her hands clasped on her lap, and her head bent down.

"I am waiting for your answer," the woman presently demanded, as she stopped before her husband and glared down upon him.

"I should think that I have spoken plainly enough," was the response, given with a forced calmness.

"Then you are determined to uphold this willful hussy in her foolish determination to stand in her own light and ruin her prospects, are you?"

"Not a very respectful way to speak of your own child, I must say," was the comment.

"Please answer my question."

"If you look upon it in that light, such is my determination," was the cool answer to the interrogation.

"I do look upon it in that light!" was the heated exclamation, "and I cannot understand what you are thinking about not to agree with me. Here is a wealthy and titled Englishman ready and anxious to honor you by marrying your daughter, and you have not determination enough to command her to accept his offer. Where, I would like to ask, will she ever find such a chance again?"

"You seem to ignore the fact that our daughter ought to be free to act in a matter in which she is most concerned, madam. She detests Stavendish Rudbury, and do you think I would command her to marry him under such a circumstance? I think too much of her happiness, and I am not so great a fool."

"By that you would imply that I am a fool."

"You are certainly acting very unwisely."

"Perhaps you would rather have your nameless hired-man, Harvey Blanchard, to be your son-in-law."

"Harvey Blanchard is in every respect worthy of her, and I am sure that her happiness would be better assured if placed in his hands."

"It is as I thought, you have neither self-respect nor family pride. You seem blind to the fact that it is the son of an English lord who has humbled himself to the extent of asking your daughter's hand in marriage. I cannot see what you are thinking about. But, no matter, I warn you that I shall use every means in my power to bring about this match, and to oppose any other."

Mr. Checkering rose from his chair.

"My patience is about exhausted," he said, "and it will be wise to bring this disgraceful scene to a close. I am going into the library, where I desire to be alone. When I see you again I hope you will be willing to listen to reason."

With this he left the room, and his wife took a step forward as though to follow him, but a word from Ermina detained her. Well she knew that Richard Checkering was in no mood to bear with her any further, and she dared not disregard his request to be left alone. Having to give vent to her fury in some direction, however, she turned upon her daughter.

"You fool!" she fumed, "you are standing in your own light. You do not know what is good for you, and you will not be guided by me. Think of what you are throwing away. There is not another young woman in this land but would jump at such a chance."

"They are welcome to it," was Ermina's response. "I want to respect your wishes, mamma, in every way I can, but in this matter my head and heart are strongly against the thing you desire."

"Your head and heart, as you so beautifully express it, have no business to stand in the way of your rising to such a position. It is not one American girl in ten thousand who ever has such a chance of becoming a lady of the British realm."

"I care nothing for that, mamma. It is all empty honor. I realize that it would be nice for you, but—"

"For me! Would you insinuate that it is my own interest and not yours that I am trying to further? You are as ungrateful as you can be. But, bear this in mind: I am determined that you shall wed Stavendish Rudbury, or you shall never marry at all. As for your marrying that nameless upstart, Blanchard, it shall never

be. You had better think it over well and change your mind."

"I have thought it over well, and my mind is fixed. I will never marry Stavendish Rudbury. It will be useless for you to urge me to do so."

"We shall see about that."

Fairly boiling with anger the high-tempered woman swept out of the room, leaving her daughter to her own reflections.

And they were gloomy enough.

"I cannot help it," she reflected, an expression of deep sorrow coming over her face. "I do not love the man, and I will not marry him—no, not even to please mamma and win the high social position. It would be a sin for me to do so when my love has gone out in another direction."

While she was weighing the matter, and while her father was sitting sad and gloomy in the library and her mother was pacing the floor of her room up-stairs, there came a ring at the door-bell.

A servant responded, and Stavendish Rudbury was announced to Mr. Checkering.

"Show him in," was the order.

Mr. Rudbury was admitted, and the servant closed the door and retired.

When civil greetings had been exchanged and a few commonplace remarks made, the Englishman came to business and made known his errand.

"Mr. Checkering," he announced, "I have called to see you upon a matter that, to me at least, is of the greatest importance."

"Please to state what it is," was the invitation.

"I will do so. It is being rumored around that I am paying attention to your daughter, and that, as you know, is true. In fact, I have already asked you for her hand in marriage. You put me off then, without giving me any reason to hope that you would favor my suit. I would like to know what your decision is regarding it."

"I thought I gave you to understand what my attitude in the matter is, sir," said Checkering.

"You certainly did not give me any reason to hope that you would favor me, but at the same time did not really say me nay."

"And I directed you to see my daughter herself, as she is the one most interested."

"I have done so."

"Well?"

"She refuses my offer; but—"

"I should think that would settle the matter, then."

"I was about to add that Mrs. Checkering is in favor of my suit, however, and if you would come to my assistance, too, I am sure the young lady would change her mind. I have this hope."

"It is a forlorn one. If my daughter has refused you, that settles the matter for good and all. It is for her to say whom she will marry, and I certainly shall not try to influence her in your favor."

"I hope this does not come out of the trouble you have had with my father, in regard to business matters."

"Not at all, sir."

"And if, after all, I can win your daughter, you will consent to our marriage?"

"When she says she wants to marry you, sir, then I will consent. I am sure I cannot promise anything fairer than that. But at the same time I know that you do not stand a ghost of a chance. She has no regard for you, and that is the vital point in the love-making and matrimonial game."

"I shall use my best endeavors to carry that vital point. Faint heart never won fair lady, you know. It is at least encouraging to know that while you will not exert your influence in my behalf, you will not oppose."

Some further remarks were exchanged, and then the Englishman took his leave.

"It is now coming to a point," he muttered, as he retraced his steps toward the Bank of England Mine. "I have been trusting to Victoria to win that fellow Blanchard as she seems to be determined to do, and so have him removed from my path, but it begins to look as though I shall have to resort to other means to reach that end. What shall it be? I shall have to give it a little careful thought. There are no doubt ways enough."

"Confound the fellow," he further meditated, "he has the inside track of me, and I am of the opinion that Checkering rather favors him. It is unfortunate that we had that trouble with Checkering. But, the case stands, as it stands, and nothing can alter it now. We shall have to fight it out. It is unfortunate, I suppose, that Checkering should have so pretty a daughter, and that I should fall in love with her."

But to return to Checkering.

As soon as young Rudbury had gone he left the library and went back into the sitting-room, where Ermina still remained.

"Stavendish Rudbury has just been to see me," he said.

"I saw him," returned Ermina.

"He has again asked me for your hand, my girl, and I have told him that when you want to marry him I will give my consent."

"That is as good as a flat refusal, papa, for my promise he will never have."

More might have been said, for Ermina seemed to have something she desired to speak about, but just then Mrs. Checkering entered.

She was in a better frame of mind, apparently, than when she had left the room a short time previously. It was clear that the calm was forced, however.

"I suppose you have settled the matter now," she observed, speaking to her husband, but not in a sharp tone.

Checkering told her just what had happened.

"I am glad it is no worse," was the comment.

"It would have been very bad to have offended the young lord. I am sure that before long both of you will see the mistake you are making, and that the desirable match will be happily consummated."

But little more was said on the subject, as Mr. Checkering soon returned to the library, and Mrs. Checkering to her room.

"We shall see," the latter murmured, as soon as she was again alone. "I will not be balked in this manner. She shall marry him at any cost."

CHAPTER XII.

ENTER A QUAIN T. QUINT.

No town in the wild West would be considered complete without its leading saloon, and the town of Rudbury had hers.

This saloon was called the "Bison's Head."

Formerly, when the town had rejoiced in the peculiar but euphonious name of Button-hole, this saloon had been called the "Nickel Button;" but these names not suiting the trained taste of Lord Rudbury, were soon discarded for others more to his liking.

This saloon had been something of a success in its humbler days, and had put a considerable fortune into the pocket of its proprietor, and when the Englishman had given notice to everybody to quit his premises or pay rent, the proprietor of the then Nickel Button was one among those who remained.

When improvements came thick and fast—when the town took on its second growth, as it were, the Bison's Head hung out its new sign, came forth in a new dress of paint, and gloried in a general renovation inside and out.

As its proprietor did not now own the place, this was looked upon as the work of Lord Rudbury, and those who looked upon it as such were not far wrong.

Seeing the popularity of the place, the Englishman invested money in it, and went into a sort of partnership with the former proprietor. Rudbury's name was not used in connection with it, however, and when he lent his presence it was noticed that he paid for everything he called for.

Of course where Rudbury went his friends followed, and it was not long when the Bison's Head was the most popular resort in the whole town.

On this night the Bison's Head was entertaining its usual complement of customers, and everything was going on nicely when something happened to wake them up.

A man came into the room leading a pig, a goat, a rooster and a goose.

Each had a string around its neck or leg, and all followed tamely along after their master.

This was something entirely new and original, as things have to be in these wide-awake times to attract any attention whatever, and all eyes were fastened upon them immediately.

The man was a rough-looking customer, who had something of the appearance of a veteran tramp, and, compared with the beasts and birds he led, they were the better-looking. They were certainly clean, and he did not look to be any over-done in that respect.

He was a man seemingly fifty years old, had long hair of a sandy color, and his face was covered with a beard about an inch long. His clothing had seen better days and long service, and it could not be said of it that it had not grown old.

Straight down to the middle of the room he marched, and there he stopped and shouted out a loud—

"Whoa!"

His zoological collection stopped immediately, and each gave forth a sound after the manner of its kind. The rooster crowed, the goat baaed, the goose hissed and piped, while the pig lent its voice in a high-keyed squeal.

Of course everybody laughed.

"Say," cried out the proprietor of the place, "you can't bring them things in here, my man."

"Seems ter me you are rather late in the day with that bit o' information," the fellow drawled, as he turned and looked at the speaker; "we are here already."

"Yes, I see you are, but you can't stay here with them things; you'll have ter take 'em right out."

"Now that is rather rough on a pilgrim stranger, it is," the fellow complained, "an' I'll leave it ter th' crowd if it ain't."

"Can't help it, this saloon ain't no side-show to a cheap circus, an' you want ter git your m'najary out o' here as soon as possible."

"All right, I reckon you're th' boss, but jest let us stay a few minnits till I have 'em perform their tricks an' rake in a few bits o' nickel, an' then we'll take ourselves away in a manner so orderly that you will look upon us with pride an' mourn fer us when we're gone. Now these here—"

"There, now, that will do. That is all we want ter hear. Just shut your trap and meander henceward. We don't—"

"Now I'm sorry ye don't," the stranger tramp interrupted, "fer ye don't know what a good thing you will miss. Now this heur goat, Billy Goat by name, though I call him Sweet William fer short, he is—"

"I don't care what he is," broke in the proprietor, as he came out from behind the bar, "I want you to take th' 'tarnel things out o' here, an' that in a hurry, too. Come, now, git."

"Really, this is th' most unkindest reception that we have met with in many a long day," the fellow lamented. "If you only knowed th' number o' miles that we have come out of our way jest ter give this town th' pleasure o' seein' us, I am sure you would not be so hasty in your decision. But, if you really insist on our makin' our presence less tangible, why of course we shall have ter submit ter th' inevitable an' debouch—that is, march out. Before we go, however, allow me just one moment. This rooster—"

"Now shut right up an' leave!" ordered the exasperated proprietor, hotly.

"Oh, let 'em stay," cried several; "we want ter see what he's got there," was added by others.

"Nary a stay. Git right out with 'em, an' that on th' double quick, too."

As he gave this order the proprietor advanced toward the stranger, as though he would throw him out the doors neck and heels.

"Jest one word more," the man with the nucleus of a menagerie requested, "a single word more."

"Not a yawp. Come, mosey right along."

"Jest one single statement, jest a—"

The fellow was back out of reach, but the mind of the proprietor was made up, and he sprang forward and grabbed the strings out of his hands and essayed to eject the objectionable creatures forthwith.

But he met with resistance and a surprise.

No sooner was the attack made than the stranger tramp's pets set up cries of the wildest kind, and resisted with all their combined might.

"Better be keeful, better be keeful," the fellow cautioned; "them critters is finely trained an' highly cultured, an' they object strongly ter havin' any hand but mine ter lead 'em around. Better be a leetle wary of 'em, mister."

"I'll be keeful of 'em, you bet," was the hot retort; "I'll kill every one of 'em! I'll larn ye ter bring sich things inter th' Bison's Head! What did ye take this place fer, anyhow?"

"Jest let me make a few remarks, an' I'll lead 'em out so peaceful that you will be proud of 'em. Jest let—"

"I'll let ye help me ter bounce 'em, an' that is all I will let ye help me do. Come, give that confounded goat a kick!"

"What! kick Billy Goat! not if I know it. An' don't you do it nuther. I kin stand a most anything, but I can't stand ter see my pet abused. Don't you do anything o' that sort, mister, whatever ye do. Don't—"

"I'll show ye what I'll do! I'll kick th' stuff in' out of 'em. There! take that con—"

The proprietor was a short, fat man, almost as thick as he was long, as is said of people of that build, and he was now in such a towering rage that his broad face was as red as a red face can be.

His anger had reached its hight, for he was used to ruling things in his saloon to suit himself, and with his last-quoted exclamation he gave a vicious kick at the goat and then turned to give another at the pig.

The second kick was not delivered in full. A reaction took place. No sooner had the first kick been made than the owner of the brute creatures gave a peculiar whistle, and instantly the whole four turned and offered fight.

The rooster and the goose jumped in as bold as a lion, the pig ran around and grabbed one of the proprietor's fat legs, and scarcely had he realized that they had turned upon him when the goat wheeled around, reared up, and butted him squarely in the stomach, setting him down on the floor with a sudden force that made the bottles on the shelves rattle merrily.

The crowd burst into a wild roar of laughter.

"Up an' at 'em!" shouted some.

"Time!" cried others.

"Fire 'em out!" yelled still others, and many more cries to the same effect were heard.

The proprietor was in a ludicrous position.

The rooster jumped up and spurred at him briskly, the goose ran in with outstretched neck and spread wings and plucked furiously at his coat, the pig held on to his leg with determined vim, and the goat continued to butt at him from every side.

"Take 'em off take 'em off!" shouted the unhappy man; "won't somebody kill 'em?"

He was fumbling around to get hold of a pistol, but the goat kept knocking him this way

and that so fast that he could not reach his pocket.

How the crowd did laugh and hoot and cheer. "I told ye ter be a leetle keerful an' go a leetle slow," reminded the owner of the collection, "but you wouldn't listen ter me. You brought it all on ter yerself."

"Take 'em off! Won't ye take 'em off?" "Take 'em off? Sartainly I'll take 'em off. I'll take 'em off on one condition."

"No condition a—ugh!—about it! Take 'em off?" "Yes, jest so, on th' condition that you will let me say a few—"

"Condition perdition! Take 'em off! Can't you hear?"

"Oh, yes, I can—" "If you don't take—oh! ugh!—'em off, I'll kill every one of 'em."

"Now, really, I don't want 'em killed, an' if you will jest say th' word that I kin spout a leetle while, I'll call 'em off in no time. What d'ye say?"

Just then the goat gave him an extra hard thump in the back, and the unhappy proprietor of the Bison's Head hastened to agree to the terms.

"Yes, yes," he called out, "I'll agree to anything to get 'em away from me. Drag 'em away an' let me git up."

"It ain't necessary fer me ter do any draggin'," the tramp stranger observed, coolly. "All I have got ter do is ter say th' word. Man was created ruler over th' beasts of th' field, th' birds of th' air, an' th' fishes of th' sea," he added, as if to give the goat opportunity to get in another thump or two, "an' I am lord an' master over these here. I will now show—"

"Please take 'em off." "Sartainly, sartainly. Come here, you foolish critters, ye, come here."

What signal he gave was not noticed, but instantly the battle ceased, and the shame-faced landlord was allowed to regain his feet.

Just then Lord Rajpoot Rudbury came in.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHADOWS OF COMING EVENTS.

"HELLO! hello, boys!" the Britisher exclaimed, in a jolly way he had when out in the evening, "what is on the carpet to-night?"

As he put the inquiry he glanced around at those assembled, and soon brought his eyes to bear upon the proprietor, the stranger tramp and the collection he had with him.

"What is all this, Gallagher?" he asked. Gallagher was the recognized landlord's name. "I tried to put 'em out," that fat worthy responded.

"And couldn't make it work, eh?" "No." "It was a case where Gallagher couldn't make her go worth a cent," the tramp chimed in.

This brought down the house. Gallagher now produced the pistol he had wanted to get hold of for so long, and flourished it.

"Shall I do fer 'em?" he asked. "Not unless you're measured fer yer wooden overcoat," the tramp coolly warned, "an' I reckon ye ain't in no hurry to wear one."

"No," decided the Englishman, "don't shoot at them. Let this fellow explain why he has brought them here, and what they are good for. Are they trained, sir?" turning to the stranger.

"That they be, an' well trained at that," was the instant answer. "There ain't no better trained critters in th' hull world nor what them is. All I was askin' fer was th' opportoonerty ter show forth their greatness, but th' landlord wouldn't hear to it. I reckon you are th' real boss o' th' place."

This caused the Britisher to wince a little. "Well, hardly that," he quibbled, "but I am a good customer, and draw a little trade, and our landlord lets me have a little freedom not allowed to everybody. I am the owner of the building, but that— But, this is none of your business. Let's see what your creatures can do."

"I thought you was tellin' more than I had any right ter know," remarked the seedy showman, "but that was your business an' not mine, an' I was brought up not ter interrupt folks when they's a-talkin'. If th' landlord here had had the same trainin' when he was young, we wouldn't had no trouble at all. All folks is not o' gentle birth, how's'ever, an' allowance has ter be made. We have ter consider whence it comes, as th' feller said when his mule kicked him. Some folks don't know no better. There's nothin' personal intended in this, you know, landlord."

"Come, come, let's see what th' critters kin do," was the interrupting call.

"Sartainly, sartainly," promised the man, "ye shall behold th' wonders o' th' brute kingdom ter once."

As he spoke he caught hold of one of the tables with which the room was supplied, pulled it out into the open space in front of the bar, and placed a chair by the side of it.

"No objection ter my usin' things, have ye?" he asked, when this was done.

"Not the least; just help yourself to whatever

you want, and it will be all right—at least I suppose it will; eh, Gallagher?"

It was the Britisher who said this, and it showed that he was the head of the concern.

"Yes, it's all right, if it's a favor ter you," the landlord answered.

"Thanks," the Englishman returned. "Yes," to the stranger "make the place your own for the time."

"That is what I like ter hear. Now, Gallagher, have you an empty cigar-box handy there?"

"Yes, here is one." "Good! Bring it and place it exactly in the middle of the table, if you will be so kind. You have promised that I shall have the whole concern for the time, and I suppose that includes yourself."

Gallagher obeyed, but not with as good grace as he might have shown had he not been handled so roughly by the goat.

"There, that will do nicely," the stranger complimented. "Now, take a glass, fill it just a little more than half-full of your very best whisky, and place the glass right on the middle of the box, as near as your eye can measure."

This, too, after the hesitation of a moment, was done.

"Good again!" the man exclaimed. "Now I will proceed to show you my first and cutest trick. No doubt you are all wondering what these animiles an' fowls is goin' ter do with that likker. You shell see. This trick is one that I preform only once in each town, and I allus make it th' first on th' programme."

They were all wondering what the trick would be.

Stepping to the table, he took up the glass, stepped back, spoke to the goat, and that animal stood up on its hind legs.

"William Goat," spoke the man then, "allow me to introduce you to the company present. Make your bow."

The goat immediately nodded its head a few times, and then dropped back to its proper position of support.

The man still held the liquor in hand. "Now, Susan," he next said, speaking to the goose, "let me introduce you."

The goose waddled out to a place where it could see and be seen, ducked its head once or twice, let its voice be heard, and retired.

"And now, G. Washington, you."

With this the man made a slight motion with his hand, and the rooster flew up to the back of the chair, where it gave a loud crow.

Still nothing was done with the glass of whisky, which was still held up so that all might see it.

"That will do," the master of ceremonies said, "that will do; fly down again; and now, last, but not by any means least, Pluto, my noble pig, let me introduce you."

At the word of command the rooster had flown, or jumped, back to the floor, and now the pig came forth. It came to the chair, got upon that, and from there on to the table.

"That is the nature of the beast," the man observed. "Gentlemen," he added, "let me introduce one of the greatest animals of its kind in all the world. This is my trained pig, Pluto, the pride of my collection. Pluto, make your bow."

The pig made a very creditable attempt. "And now," its master added, "take your seat."

Backing up to the cigar-box, the pig sat down upon it, causing the crowd to give vent to a cheer of admiration.

Still the glass of liquor had not been disposed of.

The man now lowered it, allowed the pig to look at it, and asked:

"Pluto, what shall I do with this?"

"Put it down," the pig answered in plain words, "put it down."

"Put it down?"

"That is what I said," the pig repeated, "put it down."

"Gentlemen," turning to the audience, "I always make it a point to do as Pluto says, and down it goes;" and with this the fellow raised the glass to his lips and emptied it at a single gulp.

For some moments no one said anything, but all stood as though they expected to see the liquor appear in the glass again, or something else little short of a miracle.

The nature of the trick gradually dawned upon them, however, and they could not help smiling.

The fellow had made the most natural use of the stuff that could be imagined, and the trick lay in his cuteness in getting it so cheaply.

"You're a dead beat," muttered the landlord in disgust.

"So I have been told lots of times before," was the response. "But," he added, "I only perform this trick once in each place—"

"And a good reason why," Gallagher broke in.

"Mebby you're right, mebby you're right," the stranger laughed; "I won't deny it. But, wasn't it worth anything ter hear th' pig talk?"

"I didn't tell ye ter drink it," the pig suddenly spoke up again, "and I am ashamed of ye."

"Ye didn't tell me ter drink it?" the man demanded, turning upon the porker fiercely.

"No, I didn't tell ye ter drink it."

Any one might have vowed solemnly that the pig was really speaking. It opened its mouth and moved its head in a way to add highly to the deception, and many there fully believed, for the time, that it surely did speak.

"And I say you *did* tell me ter drink it," the man insisted, in that true showman style which has been honored in the sawdust arena from time immemorial.

"An' I say I didn't," averred the pig.

"Well, then, what did you say?" was demanded.

"I simply told ye ter put it down."

"Well, you pig-headed thing you, wasn't that what I did do with it?"

"I meant down on th' table."

"Oh! why didn't you say so, then? You can't expect me ter guess at your meanin', fer it don't run in th' fambly."

The stranger tramp was a ventriloquist of the first order.

"You see what a talker Pluto is, gentlemen," he said, turning to the crowd. "I am proud of him. His talking is wonderful, but not more wonderful than his knowledge. I will now prove to you that he knows something."

Here the man took a pack of cards out of his pocket, shuffled them a little, spread some of them out like a fan, and then invited anybody to step up and draw one out.

This request was soon complied with.

"Now," said the rough-looking customer, handing the man the rest of pack, "remember what card it was you drew, and shuffle it well into the pack."

The man did this thoroughly.

"Now, Pluto," asked the showman, as he received the cards back again, "can you tell me what card that was?"

The pig nodded, evidently obeying some signal that it had been trained to obey.

"You can, eh? Well, now, how shall I find it?"

"Hold 'em up an' let 'em drop," was the spoken answer, "an' th' right one will come out on top."

There was considerable more palaver, and at last the man obeyed the spoken directions. Holding the pack of cards a little above the table, he let them drop, and sure enough, there, face up, was the card the man had chosen.

This ended the show for the time being, but secretly.

the seeming tramp announced that on the next night, if he could hire a place, he intended to give an exhibition, of which this was but the forerunner; and so forth.

He had done some profitable advertising, and in a little while he led his birds and beasts out of the saloon, and was seen there no more that night. But he was not forgotten, and everybody began to look forward to the morrow night.

CHAPTER XIV.

THINGS IN THE UNDER WORLD.

WHEN Stavendish Rudbury left Richard Checkering's house, he went, as we have shown, direct to the office of the Bank of England Mine.

There he found Randolph Gwinnett, the superintendent of the mine, smoking a cigar and awaiting his coming, as was evident from what was said.

"Did you think I was never coming?" Stavendish asked.

"Oh, no," was the response, "I did not expect you any earlier than this."

"I had a matter of business to get off my mind, and thought I would have it done with. That detained me a little."

The superintendent smiled.

"So I thought, when I noticed the direction from which you came," he remarked.

"Ha! you know where I have been, then?"

"I can guess."

"Well, there is just where I have been, Dolph. But it was no go. That is to say, I didn't make much out of it."

"Too bad."

"I should say it was. But, we can't have all things to please us in this world, it is said, though I am going to make a big effort to have this one thing to please me."

"A flat refusal, I should judge."

"From the girl, yes; and her dad only promises his consent when she shall have accepted me. Won't use his influence at all. It looks dubious."

"Yes, about as bad as my case."

"That is a fact. But, I am trying to do all I can for you with Victoria, old boy, and now I want you to lend a hand in my case. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will."

"I have made up my mind to put that fellow Blanchard out of the way, and I shall have—"

His companion turned pale with the coolness of the threat, and interrupted to say:

"I can't have any hand in that sort of work."

"You don't get my meaning," Stavendish reassured. "I mean, to get him away from the place in some way or other. What did you suppose I was driving at?"

This explanation of his words did not quite

clear up their hideous portent, for to "put a person out of the way" has a significant meaning peculiarly its own.

Perhaps he wanted now to "hedge" his position, seeing that his friend did not fall in with him readily.

"I can't help how you mean it," said the superintendent, further, "I can't lend assistance in that direction."

"You haven't the nerve you used to have, then."

"You wouldn't say that, I can assure you, if it were not for one thing. The reason I cannot help you is this: As soon as I do so I begin to weaken my own hand in the game. I have, I must tell you, been hoping that—But, what of that? It is just as broad as it is long. Yes, I will help you. Say what your plan is."

"What were you getting at?"

"That does not matter now, I am with you."

The mind of the superintendent had been busy, and he had spoken his thoughts aloud. He had been hoping all along that Harvey Blanchard and Checkering's daughter would marry, for that would put an end to the hopes Victoria Rudbury clearly had of winning Blanchard for herself. To remove Blanchard out of the way, would cut this hope off short; and thus far he had reasoned it out, aloud, partly, when the other side of the question presented itself. To remove Blanchard altogether would be to put him even more effectively beyond Victoria's reach.

This might have been reasoned out by Stavendish, if he had given it enough thought, but he had cared too little about it.

"Then you have changed your mind completely?" he queried.

"Yes, turned clear around," was the assurance. "Name your plan, and I am in with you."

"Good. I thought you would not fail me. But, we will talk about it later. Are the men on hand for the night's work?"

"Yes, they are all on hand now, I guess. They have been coming in. Shall we go down?"

"Yes, we will go down."

The superintendent locked the front door of the office, put out the light, and then he and Stavendish left the building by a rear door and crossed over to the entrance to the mine.

Arriving there, they had to give a pass-word before they were allowed to go in.

This was something new in the annals of gold-mining. Had it been generally known that such a system was carried on at the Bank of England, it might have aroused a suspicion that the ore of that mine must be of enormous value.

When they found themselves in the tunnel, their next move was to supply themselves with proper lights, and that done, they went on in company with some of their men who had been waiting for them there.

The tunnel led away at a gentle slope for some distance, and then came an abrupt drop. Means of descent and ascent were here provided, of course, and in a few minutes they were at the bottom of the shaft.

There was considerable of room here, and another tunnel led away in one direction.

Along this the men advanced, and presently came to another roomy place. Here there was a rift in the rocky wall on one side, through which there came a breath of cold air as they passed, and beyond which all was inky blackness.

On a little further, and the mine proper was reached.

Tools were lying around just where they had been dropped when the men had knocked off work, and the mine had the appearance of mines in general.

There was one little difference, however. On one side seemed to be what might be suspected of being an ante-room to a mammoth cave. There was, indeed, an opening on that side, and it was guarded.

This was stranger still than the fact of there being a guard at the entrance above ground.

When the men came to a stop, on reaching this place, the superintendent observed:

"Now, my men, you have been partly told why you are here for extra work, and now I will tell you the rest about it. We are going to drill a hole through that wall, and, with one of our driller-engines, pump the Morning Star full of water."

"Good!" the men exclaimed, "we're in for that."

"But," cautioned Stavendish, "it must be a secret with you, one and all. We must not let our hand be seen in the game."

"Quite right, quite right, m'lord," the men agreed in one voice; "e 'ad no business to hown ha mine 'ere, hany'ow."

"Mind that you do not talk about it among yourselves."

While this was being said, two of the men lighted the lamps with which the mine was provided, for of course it was as dark down there at noontide as at midnight, and lamps were a necessity.

When this was done, their hand-lamps were extinguished, except one or two, and the men were ready for work.

The superintendent lost no time in directing

them what to do, and they were soon as busy as bees.

"Now," Gwinnett said, let us go further. There is nothing I can do here just now, and I can show you how the plan is progressing."

"All right," responded Stavendish, "lead on."

Turning away from the men at work, they stepped across to the side where the opening appeared in the rocky wall, and approached the point where the man on guard was standing.

They carried their lamps, and a light overhead where the guardsman stood revealed that he was well armed.

When they reached him they stopped and gave a pass-word, and were allowed to go on.

In a few moments they stood in a great cave that seemed to stretch up and away into distance immeasurable.

Away off in the distance a few lights flickered, and all around them the floor of the cavern was strewn with fragments of rock which assumed all manner of fantastic shapes as the light of their lamps fell upon them.

The two men turned off to the right, as soon as they were well into the cave, and a few steps brought them to a body of water. It seemed at first sight to be a pool of still water, but it was moving slowly.

On the brink of this stream a little structure of wood had been made, to which was fixed the end of a large hose, the end hanging over and down into the water.

"This is the nearest point," the superintendent explained, "and it will work like a charm, just as we thought it would. The hose is plenty long enough, and as soon as the hole can be drilled we will carry the hose up, attach it to the pump, and in one night we can make it uncomfortable for the Checkerings."

"I should say so."

"A nice way to treat your prospective father-in-law, eh?"

"Ha, ha! I should remark that it is. But, business is business, and the present prospect of his ever being my father-in-law looks slim."

"Shall we go any further?"

"No, it is not necessary; nothing is going on. Let's get up into the mine again. It feels warmer where there is more light."

"It is warmer up there, for the lamps and the fire in the little engine make it so. Come on, for I hate this cold hole, too."

It felt like being in an ice-house, there in the cavern, and they were glad when they came out where the men were at work again.

This cavern, strange as it may seem, was a secret one. It was not known to the people of the town, except such as were employed by the Englishmen, and they were under orders not to tell about it.

There was a tale hanging thereby which will be told further on.

When they came out into the mine the men had just got their driller into position, and now the work began.

It was a piece of business that was likely to lead to trouble. It might be all right, and work well for the Englishmen, and it might turn out to be all wrong. That could not be foreseen.

When everything was running along nicely, the superintendent put the work into the hands of a foreman, telling him at what hour to stop, and he and Stavendish returned to the upper world.

They were certainly going to a great deal of trouble to keep the secret of that great, dark cavern to themselves. Was it lined with gold?

CHAPTER XV.

TWO-LEGGED GAME.

"HA, ha, ha! that was a purty good one, too, a purty good one, Napoleon; now wasn't it?"

Old Riddles and his dog.

It was early morning, and the sun had made his appearance only a little time before. The old ranger and his dog were taking their customary "dose" of riddles.

They had come up out of the little gulch where they had camped with Sweetwater Saul and the stranger, and the old ranger was seated high up on a projecting rock where he had a good view all around, and the dog occupied its usual place at his feet.

The other two men were still asleep, Saul having been pretty well worn out, and the stranger the same.

Riddles was an early bird. If he did not always get a prize for early rising, that was not his fault. He set great store by the old saying: It is the early bird that gets the worm.

At the very first streak of the coming light, he had roused up, and motioning to the dog, had stalked silently out of the camp.

The others had not heard them go, and slept right on, being much in need of the rest.

Coming to a suitable place, the old ranger had stopped, sat down, produced his little book of riddles, and began to regale himself and the dog.

Clapping his hand upon his knee as he uttered the words with which this chapter opens, he caused the dog to frolic around a little, and this delighted the old ranger greatly.

"Best thing in th' world, riddles is, ain't that so, old dog? They are 'most as good as break-

fast, unless we happen ter be too tarnally famished. That is what I say, an' I am sure you will agree with me. Now let's see if we kin find any more. Yes, here is one th' first crack: 'What is that which if a man hasn't got it he don't want it, and yet if he had it he wouldn't take the world for it?' Now, then, old dog, you think you are smart; answer *that*."

The dog did not attempt to do so, needless to say, but kept its eyes fixed upon its master's face awaiting another signal to play.

"D'ye give it up?" the old man asked.

The dog did.

"Wal, I don't wonder that ye do, fer it is a hard one, an' no mistake; that is ter say it would be if th' answer wasn't here. Still, I have got one o' th' very things myself, an' I kin assure ye that I *wouldn't* take th' world fer it—no, ner two of 'em jined together. Kin ye guess it now? It ain't my gun, nor it ain't my coat, an' nuther is it my hat. Give it up yet, do ye? Wal, then, I s'pose I'll have ter tell ye: Th' thing which if a man hasn't got it he don't want it, an' yet if he had it—which is th' case with me, Nap—if he had it he wouldn't take th' world fer it, is a bald head. Ha, ha, ha! that was too rich fer yer blood, now wasn't it, old feller."

Again he clapped his hand upon his leg, as was his habit, and the dog responded by frisking around playfully.

"That is what you like, my four-footed pardner, that is what you like, an' I know it. Sweetwater Saul kin blow about that mule o' his, but it can't hold a candle ter you. What does that thing know about riddles, I'd like ter know? Nothin' a'-tall. Might jest as well tell riddles ter a stump, as ter tell 'em ter that mule. I'll tell Saul so, too, if he goes ter any of his braggin'. Now let's see if ye kin git yer grip on this one: 'When is a fish above its station?' Now I don't really git on ter that one myself ter any great extent, but that is what it says in th' book. Mebbe if you was a fisherman you could answer better. Here's th' answer ter it, anyhow: 'A fish is above its station when it rises to take a fly.' Kin ye onderstand it? It must be a flyin'-fish, I s'pose."

Its master's manner did not warrant another frolic after that riddle, and so the dog remained quiet.

"I don't blame ye, Nap," the old fellow observed, as he thumbed the leaves of the book in search of other riddles, "I don't blame ye a bit, fer that one *was* rather tame, an' that is a fact. There is some of 'em that I can't see through right handy, an' I s'pose it is th' same with you. Now try this one: 'What is that which has a bed but never sleeps in it, and a mouth but never speaks?' Now chaw on that."

He waited a moment, as though he really looked for the dog to respond in words.

"Give it up, do ye? Wal, I'll tell ye: Th' thing that has a bed but never sleeps in it, an' a mouth but never speaks, is a river. An' now tackle this here one: 'What is th' difference between a dairymaid and a swallow?' Now that is one that will make yer hair curl."

The dog evidently gave that one up, too.

"Can't guess it, eh? Well, you don't seem ter be sharp after 'em this mornin', an' that is a fact. Mebbe you would slorin' out th' answers fast enough, though, if you could talk like other folks. Here is th' answer ter it: Th' difference between a dairymaid an' a swallow is, one skims th' milk an' th' other skims th' water. Now here is another: 'What did Job's wardrobe consist of?' Ha, ha, ha! that is a good one, an' I reckon it means th' Job in this other book o' ours. Go fer it."

The faithful old dog frolicked around a little, in response to the old ranger's laughter, but evidently gave up the riddle. But the old man did not look at it in that light.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "you kin guess that one, kin ye. I'm sorry ye can't tell right out what ye think it is, fer you have got a wise head, you have, dog, an' jest as like as not you have got it th' same as it is in th' book. Now, here is th' answer to it, an' you kin see: Job's wardrobe consisted of three wretched comforters. Ha, ha, ha! That is about as good a one as we have kem across in some time. Th' idee of a man afflicted with a superfluity o' b'iles goin' around wearin' three wretched comforters fer clothes. Ha, ha, ha!"

This one seemed to tickle the old man right well, and he slapped his leg numerous times, thus causing the dog to act as though it were crazy with joy.

"Oh, but you *do* like riddles, you do," the ranger commented, when he got a little over his merriment; "they is 'most meat an' drink to you. Where would that sad-lookin' critter of a mule be, aside o' you? Now, here is another: 'Why is a postage-stamp like an obstinate donkey?' Why, hang me if that don't hit that mule o' Saul's right broadside. You orter guess this one, sure."

The dog's only reply was to beat a tattoo with its tail.

"Oh, but that is a good one," the ranger repeated, "an' here is what the answer is: Th' reason why a postage-stamp is like an obstinate donkey is because it has to be licked before it kin be made ter do duty. Ho, ho, ho! if that

don't suit that mule-critter o' Saul's, then I don't know what does."

Much taken up as the old ranger was with his pleasing pastime, he did not allow it to engage his whole attention, for ever and anon he would glance down into the gulch where he had left Saul and the other man sleeping.

It was now getting light enough for him to see them as they lay there beside the smoldering fire. They were still sleeping soundly, and he began to ask himself whether they intended to sleep all day. As for him and his dog, they were now basking in the sunshine, having climbed to a considerable height, and it did not feel at all unwelcome after the chill of the night.

"This is glorious, ain't it, old dog?" the ranger observed, as he moved around and gave his back the benefit of the warmth. "This is glorious. Th' wild old Rockies all around us, th' purty of th' sunrise, an' all th' riddles that our hearts kin desire. Say, would ye like ter have one or two more afore we go down an' wake them sleepers up fer breakfast—pervided we kin find any?"

Being addressed direct, the dog whined.

"Ye would, eh? Wal, let me see. Here is one, sich as it is: 'Why is a tale-bearer like a brick-layer?' Now that hadn't orter stick ye bad. Come, old feller, why is one like t'other? Kin ye tell me?"

The dog evidently could not. Indeed, it seemed to be thinking about something else just then.

"Can't tell, eh? Wal, a tale-bearer is like a brick-layer because he raises stories. An' now here is another: 'When is love deformed?'"

The dog was now paying no attention at all, but was looking down into the gulch, and seemed to be listening attentively, or carefully exercising its keen sense of smell.

"Ye'll have ter excuse me fer interruptin' ye," the old ranger said, "but I know you'd like th' answer, now that ye have got th' fu'st part. When a good dog like you gits the scent, he 'most gen'ly wants the game, too. Th' time when love is deformed is when it is too much on one side. An' now," putting away the book and getting up, "what is it that you have got yer smeller set on?"

The dog moved its tail from side to side, but did not utter a sound, and the old ranger knelt down beside it, laid his hand on its back, and looked in the direction it was looking.

Several minutes passed, and nothing was seen.

Strain his ears as he would, the old ranger could not hear a thing, but he knew the dog too well to think that it was making any mistake. It was watching for something.

Hardly a breath of air was stirring, and the ranger had to wet his finger and hold it up in order to find which direction it was moving.

It was coming from the direction in which the dog was looking.

This proved that the animal was using its nose rather than its ears.

With the greatest patience they waited, and after a time their patience was rewarded. The stooping form of a man was seen coming down the gully, treading with the stealthy step of a panther.

The dog might have uttered a growl, had not a pressure from its master's hand restrained it.

The man crept slowly on, pace by pace, and presently another was seen following in his footsteps.

"I'll be jiggered if I like th' 'pearance o' them fellers, an' that not a-tall. They ain't white men, nor yet they ain't Injun. What kin they be?" the old ranger inquired in mind. "Ding bast my old hide if I don't believe they are fellers from that blue-smoke kentry down below, where our old pardner Saul has been on a visit. I'd like ter know what they're up ter."

The two East-Indians, for such they were, crept forward with the snake-like caution and silence for which they are famed, and although the old ranger used his ears at their best, he could not detect a sound.

They were stripped, except a cloth around their middle, and each carried something in his hand that the old ranger could not make out.

"Nap," the latter whispered, "they krip along as though they mean mischief, an' ten ter one they do. Wonder if Old Riddles can't take a hand in th' game too. I mebbly can't do it jest as pooty as they do, but I bet they won't hear me. An' they won't hear you nuther, dog. Come on."

Taking a firm grip upon his rifle, the old man began to descend the slope, the dog following right at his heels, and they were almost, if not indeed quite, as silent in their movements as the fellows they were following.

What would come of it? That was what the Rocky ranger was asking himself.

CHAPTER XVI.

NIPPED IN THE BUD.

Up where the old ranger had been, the sun was shining, and of course it was light down in the gully too. Light and darkness follow each other quickly in the mountains. There is very little dawn and twilight there.

It was not yet so light down below, however,

that the two creeping figures found no shadows to shelter them. Wherever an overhanging rock or bush cut off the light in any degree, they took advantage of it.

So did the old ranger, as he and the dog crept along after them, using every possible precaution not to let them suspect his presence.

"Ding bast my homely old pictur!" he exclaimed in mind, "but I would like ter know what they're up ter. An' what ugly-lookin' customers they be, too. Wonder they wouldn't wear some clothes. They ain't Injun, that I'll vow; nor yet be they Chinees. I'd like ter know what they is? It is purty sartain what they will be, if they go ter cuttin' up any dirty tricks an' my old rifle heur has ter do any talkin' to 'em. They'll be tan-colored corpusses, an' that in post haste, too."

So he reflected, and he held the old rifle ready for instant use.

Presently the two fellows came out into a place where it was lighter, and they found no covering shadows. There Old Riddles could get a better look at them, and made out what it was they carried in their hands. Each held what seemed to be simply a piece of small rope.

"Wonder what they intend ter do with that?" their shadower interrogated in thought. "If they are after Sweetwater Saul, an' he happens ter wake up, they wouldn't stand much of a show with him, with nothin' but a bit o' rope ter fight with. Mebbly that is ter tie 'em up with, though."

If he had known anything about India and her natives, he would have known without further proof that these men were stranglers.

Such they were, and the pieces of rope which they had in hand were in fact slender silken cords, a deadly thing in their trained hands.

On they crept, and the old ranger after them, and ere long they came near to the place where Sweetwater Saul and the camp lodger lay.

The two were still sleeping.

"I ruther think it would be bad fer 'em, if I wasn't in th' vicinity o' neighborhood, I do by hokey!" the old man further communed with himself. "That old mule o' Saul's would stand there like a stump an' see her master killed right afore her very eyes, an' never wake him up. If I thought old Napoleon heur would sarve me like that, I'd shoot him on th' spot. But he wouldn't. Nap has got hoss sense, he has, an' I'd like ter see two sich p'izen varmints come a-sneakin' in on me when I's asleep. They couldn't do it. He'd have 'em by th' bare leg afore they'd know it."

Not for an instant did the ranger take his eyes off the two rascals. If by any chance he should happen to make a noise loud enough to reach their ears and cause them to turn, he wanted to greet them in the same instant with an order to hold their hands aloft. And they were likely to glance back anyhow at any moment.

He was debating in mind what he should do. Should he call them to a halt before they reached the sleepers? or let them go on and fully prove their intentions?

The latter course was the one he settled upon.

On they crept, now with even more caution than ever, if that were possible, and on after them crept Riddles. The crisis was now near at hand.

In a moment more they were at the place where the mule was tied, and just beyond the mule lay the sleepers.

"If that was only me asleep there," the old mountaineer thought in disgust, "an' that mule beast was only Napoleon, what fun there would be jest about now. But, they'd never git that near without my knowin'—Great rumblin' yearthquakes! Ha, ha, ha!"

Something of a most surprising nature happened.

The two rascals were just passing the mule, when that animal turned its head lazily to look at them, and the next instant up went both of its hind legs and one of the fellows turned a complete somerset and a quarter-turn more, and landed upon his back with a force that knocked him almost insensible.

This it was that brought the exclamation out of the old ranger, and then he laughed heartily and loud.

The other rascal had straightened up instantly, and had turned to run back the way he had come, but he was met face to face with the old ranger's rifle.

The noise brought Sweetwater Saul and the other man to their feet in short order, and both seemed to take in the situation at a glance.

"Hold on thar, varmint, ding bast ye," Old Riddles ordered, "or I'll chuck a lump o' cold lead inter yer vitals. Don't ye dare ter run."

Whether the fellow could understand him or not he understood what it meant to have the rifle pointed straight at his nose, and he quickly let fall the cord he had in his grasp and held up his hands.

"What in tarnation is goin' on heur?", demanded Sweetwater Saul.

"That is jest what I'd like ter know," responded Riddles. "These heur varmints was a-sneakin' up on ye, an' I had a notion they meant ter do fer ye, an' was right after 'em with my old rifle ready ter talk, when dast me if that

mule o' yourn didn't lift her hoofs an' clip one o' 'em over as nice as ye please."

"Polly Ann did that?"

"She did, Saul, fer gilt-edge truth."

"That is nothin'," was Saul's cool comment, then, "fer that is jest like her. You couldn't hurt Sweetwater Saul when his ole mule is around. Now if it was that dog o' yourn then I might not—"

"Don't you say nothin' ag'in' my dog, you homely old scarecrow, you, fer I won't have it. Napoleon smelled 'em afore they was within a mile o' th' place, an' had me right on guard. What would you done if th' mule hadn't been there?"

"But, th' mule was thar, an' that is th' beauty of it. She is allus in th' right place at th' right time."

"Who are these creatures?" inquired Paul Richley, speaking for the first time after having taken a look at the pair.

"You know as much about 'em as I do," answered Old Riddles.

"They look like Indians."

"Nary Injun about them fellers. They—"

"I mean Indians from India."

"Then all Injun ain't th' same breed, eh? I thought they was. Where is th' Injy you speak about?"

"Around on the other side of the world. They look—"

"I kin tell ye what they are, an' that right to th' dot," interjected Sweetwater Saul.

"What are they?"

"They areimps from th' red-hot region below, that is what they are."

"I haven't any doubt but they are something of that sort in nature," agreed Richley. "Do you know what these strings are for that they had in their hands?"

"I was wonderin' about that p'int," said Riddles.

"I will tell you. These fellows are stranglers, as they are called. They creep up on their victims, twist their cords around their necks, and once they get them there, death is certain. But, what are they doing here?"

"There's plenty more of 'em over at th' town o' Rudbury," informed Saul.

The stranger was full of questions on the point, all of which Sweetwater Saul did his best to answer, and then they set about making their prisoners secure.

The one the mule had kicked over had not come to his senses fully, but was sitting up and looking around him in a very dazed manner.

"Oh, you needn't look," said Saul, as he went up to him and bound his hands with the silken cord; "ye needn't look, for it was my old mule that floored ye, an' she will do th' same thing every time any sich a heathen as you comes foolin' around. You kin thank yer lucky star that she didn't kick th' whole head off ye."

"Yes," chimed in Old Riddles, "an' you kin thank yer other stars that that knock-kneed and spavined old mule wasn't my dog. If it had been, you would now be a chawed-up mess o' nothin'."

"That's your talk," growled Saul.

"I know it is, you old rascal you," retorted Riddles, "an' ain't it so? I'd like ter know if it ain't."

"Then you kin know it, fer it ain't. If my mule wasn't no better than that homely cur, I'd—"

"There, there, my friends," Richley interrupted to pacify, "let it drop. I would not like to hear you quarrel over so small a matter."

"Then let him keep still about my dog," complained Riddles.

"Yes, an' let him hold his head shut about my mule," vociferated Saul.

"I didn't say anything too bad about it," jangled Riddles.

"An' I'll say more about your old cur that you won't want ter hear," jawed Saul.

"There, there, there!" exclaimed the lodger, "let it drop. I have no doubt both of them are very worthy animals. We have—"

"Worthy!" exclaimed Riddles, "wal I should say so! Why, that—"

"Worthy!" from Saul at the same time, "that ain't no name fer it. Why—"

"Now, now, friends, let us have peace," their lodger implored. "You can settle that at some other time. We—"

"Let him keep—"

"Yes, an' let him keep his—"

"Yes, both of you keep still about it for the present. You have enough to do to attend to your prisoners."

"What shall we do with 'em, old humbug?" Saul asked, turning to Riddles in as good a humor as he ever was in, much to the surprise of their guest.

"I reckon we'll tote 'em along ter town with us, old quarrelsome," was the cheery response.

The two miserable wretches stood by in terrified silence. The one had not got over the effect of his fall, and the other was still laboring under the effect of his scare.

Whether they could talk any English or not, was not known, and when they, the old ranger and the others, tried to make them talk, they were met with a jargon that they could not understand, and soon gave it up.

"I have been th' means o' makin' folks talk, when they thought they couldn't, nobow," said Old Riddles, "but I had some grounds fer supposin' that they was playin' off. Here I don't know how it is. It might only be a waste o' time ter try it."

"Ye're right," agreed Saul, "an' fer my part I don't believe they kin talk our tongue."

"Then we won't fool no time with 'em."

A hasty breakfast was eaten, of such as they had, which was not much, and then the mule was packed and they started.

It was a long route around to the main trail, and it took them a good many hours to make the distance, but along in the afternoon they reached their destination, marching into town with their prisoners in tow.

It was something of a surprise to the friends of Lord Rudbury, to see two of his men brought into town in this manner. What would his lordship say?

CHAPTER XVII.

GUILTY? OR NOT GUILTY?

It was past mid-afternoon when they came into town, and as the old Rocky ranger looked around at the place he could not help exclaiming:

"Ding bast it, but this town o' Button-hole has growed some! Hang me if I would hardly know it was th' same place. You fellers has been doin' some rousin' improvin' in this same part of th' kentry, hang me if ye ain't, Saul."

"Thar!" cried Sweetwater Saul, "I knowed you'd keep on till you'd done it."

"Done what?" the old ranger demanded.

"Let th' cat out'n th' bag."

"What cat?" innocently; "didn't know there was any cat in any bag. What're ye tryin' ter git through ye?"

"You know well enough, or at least ye'd orter."

Old Riddles looked puzzled.

Their camp lodger was walking ahead, their two prisoners went next, and the two old mountaineers brought up the rear. What they said was to each other only.

"You know well enough," Sweetwater went on to explain, "that I was tryin' ter pass myself off as a brother o' mine, calling myself Noah instead of Saul, ter fool my enemies; an' here you up an' call me Saul. What's th' use o' my tryin' ter be somebody else? You ain't got no more sense than your dog."

"That is a rousin' compliment to Napoleon, it is by hokey!" exclaimed Riddles, not seeming to take offense. "But you've gone off half-cocked, you miserable old galoot, you. Nobody else but you heard me mention th' name."

"That is all right, but it would 'a' been th' same if there had been a hundred standin' around."

"Would it? That is whar you made your mistook. I ain't so foolish as I am foolish lookin'."

"You'd orter be thankful fer that."

"I am. But, ter come right down ter business. I don't think you kin carry out any sich disguise as that. You are Saul Brayton, an' anybody that ever knowed ye will swear ter it."

"No, I ain't, nuther. I'm my twin brother, Noah."

"All right, but how about th' mule? That is Saul's critter, an' you can't git over it. An' you are sich a old loonytick that you couldn't hold out in playin' th' double fer half an hour. Why, jest let me say one word in praise o' my dog, which I most sartainly will, an' you will be up in arms ter brag about yer old mule in less'n no time. Now, wouldn't ye?"

"I kin keep my head shut when I want ter, an' don't you fergit that. It is more'n you kin do."

"Well, shall I call ye Noah?"

"Yes, call me that."

"All right, an' heur we be."

They had now come down to the business part of the town, where the stores, the saloons, the hotel, etc., were centered.

"Who-o-oa! ye homely, stubborn mule-critter, ye, whoa!" cried Sweetwater Saul, as he drew up on the rein; "can't see what ye was ever made fer. If my brother Saul owned you, it is a sartain sign o' loonacy on his part, sure."

"Kerrect," whispered Old Riddles, in a tantalizing way; "ye're shoutin' gilt-edge truth now, fer sartain."

The look Saul gave him was enough to have frightened a timid man, and it was plain to be seen that the old veteran of the Hills had all he could do to hold his tongue. Even as it was, he found vent for his ire. Old Riddles's dog came near him just then, and raising his foot as though to kick it, he cried:

"Out of th' way, ye homely cur o' low degree, afore I stuff th' kickin' out of ye. If my brother owned a mule, thank goodness he didn't disgrace th' fambly by havin' sich a brute as you be taggin' after his heels."

"You kick that dog, an' by hokey your fool of a brother's mule will be a dead one in jest two seconds," warned the old ranger.

This took place all within a few brief moments.

"Here we are," cried Paul Richley, their

night's lodger, as he stepped up on the porch of the Bison's Head Saloon and took off his hat in the shade, "and I, for one, am not sorry."

"Nuther be I," voted Old Riddles, as he followed the example, having ended the brief spat between himself and Saul.

All the idlers around the streets who had seen them come into the town, hastened to the saloon, and foremost among them were the friends of Lord Rudbury, who, recognizing the prisoners as his men, were eager to know what they had been doing.

At the same time, those in the saloon came out, and among them, as it so happened, was Lord Rudbury himself.

The eyes of the Englishman seemed to find Sweetwater Saul instantly, and his face turned deathly pale for a moment.

What his thoughts were can only be surmised.

"Yas, heur we be," chimed in Saul, as he slid from the back of the mule, "an' I ruther guess we're nigh about tuckered. Be I right, pardners?"

"That is about th' truth of it," supported Old Riddles.

"Hello, Saul!" some one in the crowd cried out; "whar hev ye been fer so long a time? We begun ter think ye must be dead."

"There it goes ag'in," remarked Saul. "Everybody is takin' me fer that bad egg of a brother o' mine. I ain't Saul, boyees, but I am his twin brother, Noah. Do any of ye know whar Saul is? From what I've hearn, it seems that he ain't been se'd heurabouts fer some space o' while."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed several, "that is a pooty good one. We knows ye too well, old feller."

"Besides," others chimed in, "there's th' mule ter prove it."

"Sorry ye can't take my word fer it," lamented Saul, "but mebbly I kin prove it ter ye. This heur homely critter was found wanderin' around in th' Hills by my old pardner heur, Mr. Zeb Horn, better known as Old Riddles. Ain't that so, Riddles?"

"That is gilt edge truth," the ranger averred.

Lord Rudbury's face was a study. He hardly knew, it seemed, whether to credit this statement, or to credit the evidence of his eyes that this was Sweetwater Saul and none other.

Others all around were in the same quandary. This matter, however, just at present, was of only secondary importance. The two prisoners were attracting general attention, and already questions were being asked concerning them.

"These heathen varmints heur?" interrogated Old Riddles, in response to the questionings; "these copper-colored imps o' perdition, as my friend Noah calls 'em? I'll tell ye what they're doin' priz'ners, an' that in short order, too. They tried ter git th' dead-wood on us this mornin', an' send us off ter th' happy huntin' grounds afore our time was up. But they didn't do it. We got th' bulge on 'em. Thanks ter my old dog heur—"

"Yas, an' this old mule heur, too," Sweetwater could not help chiming in.

"Right you are, Noah," the old ranger admitted, "th' mule did lend a little help at th' last minnit, but th' dog got thar fu'st. As I was goin' ter say," he went on, turning again to the crowd, "th' p'izen varmints kem stealin' down ont'er us this mornin', ter choke our wind off, but my dog got wind o' them afore their leetle skeem kem ter a head, an' heur they be. Now I'd like ter ask whose critters they be."

There was nothing for Lord Rudbury to do but to step forward and own that they belonged to him, or were his employees, as he put it.

"Those fellows are in my employ," he observed, "and I cannot understand why they should seek the life of any man. Is there not some mistake about it?"

"Nary a mistook," asserted Riddles, "fer we got th' bulge on 'em, an' caught 'em in th' very act. Ain't that so, friend Richley?"

"That is the way it looks," their lodger supported.

"But, what is the proof?" demanded Rudbury. "Had they actually laid hands upon any of you?"

"Bet yer life they hadn't," exclaimed Sweetwater, "fer this old—I mean fer old Riddles thar, he was too sooner fer 'em."

A look from Old Riddles had saved him from boasting further about the mule.

"We didn't give 'em th' chance ter git that fur with their rascally work," supplemented Riddles.

"Then what is the proof?" the Englishman insisted.

"The proof," Richley volunteered to explain further, "is this: The two miserable wretches were stealing down upon us, like the stranglers they are, with their silken cords in hand, ready for their devilish work, when they were surprised and captured. We considered it proof enough."

"That was enough for you under the circumstances, certainly," the Britisher admitted, "but the men themselves must be heard in the matter. Is that not fair, my friends?" appealing to the crowd.

"Yes, yes, that is fair," was the response.

"We don't in no wise object to that," ap-

proved Riddles, "an' if they kin git out of th' scrape, let 'em."

"That's th' ticket," supported Sweetwater; "that is th' way I vote; an' I am sure if my brother Saul was heur he would be on th' same side with us. Ain't that kerrect, Riddles?"

"That is about th' sort o' a man he uster be when I knowed him," the old ranger joined in.

"Of course, for it is no more than justice," the Englishman further remarked. "Now let us see what they will say. If I find they are in the wrong, and that they were really intent upon killing you, they shall hang like dogs."

Turning to the two Indians then, he said something to them in their own language, to which they responded quickly enough. And for some moments he held quite a little talk with them. When he had done, he turned back to the crowd and announced:

"Gentlemen, it is all a sad mistake. That is to say, a sad one for these two poor fellows. They are fortunate that these men did not take the law into their own hands and hang them on the spot."

"Then they own up to their guilt, do they?" interrupted Old Riddles.

"Not by any means," was the reply. "They are as innocent as I am. They had no idea or intention whatever of killing you. They did not know you were there until they came suddenly upon you where you were asleep, and I guess the scare they have had has punished them sufficiently for their blunder. They were looking for one of their fellow-countrymen who has decamped with their wages."

"Is that gilt-edge truth?" demanded Old Riddles, as he looked squarely into the Britisher's eyes.

"Of course it is," was the assurance; "do you think I would lie to you about it?"

"I don't pertend ter account fer what any man would do," the old ranger fearlessly declared. "Old Zeb Horn is about th' only human critter that I kin put full confidence in."

"Well, take my word for it or not," Rudbury bustered, "you have got the truth of the whole matter, and you had better let my men go free."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SOME SUGGESTIVE FEARS.

OLD Riddles and Sweetwater Saul looked at each other.

Should they obey this peremptory order?

"You may just as well let them go, my friends," volunteered Paul Richley, "as in the absence of further proof their word must be taken."

"An' we must take one man's word that that is their word, eh?" questioned Sweetwater Saul.

"That is the best that can be done, so far as I can see," Richley decided. "I do not suppose the gentleman would make any false statement about it."

"Of course not," confuted the Englishman; "did I not promise that they should hang, if I found them guilty? And I am sure their explanation is reasonable enough."

"Wal, if sich is th' case, we'll let 'em go," assented the old ranger, "but my hoss sense tells me that there is a nigger in th' fence somewhere, an' that he ain't no small chap, nuther."

"Ditto here," chimed in Sweetwater. "If my brother Saul war only heur, his opine would be wuth a good deal on th' subject. Howsum-dever, let 'em go."

This decision arrived at, the two Indians were allowed to go free, and they lost no time in getting away from the scene.

Old Riddles watched them as long as he could see them, and when they had at last disappeared he shook his head in a very doubtful and perhaps ominous manner.

"That is a specimen o' human critter that I don't take any fancy to," he muttered. "There is somethin' mighty p'izen-lookin' about 'em, an' that is jest th' gilt edge truth of th' hull business."

"I am sorry that you cannot take my word in the matter," remarked Rudbury.

"It don't look a heap as though we haven't taken yer word, I should say," retorted the old ranger. "Haven't we let 'em go?"

"Yes, an' without th' bootin' they desarved anyhow," added Saul.

"And seem sorry that you have done so. But, let us say nothing more about it. The fellows are innocent of any wrong to you, of that I am sure; and now that they are free, I have no further interest in the matter."

"There is another matter that we have an interest in, though," declared Old Riddles, "an' I fer one would like ter have some light shed ont'er it."

As he said this he looked straight at the Britisher.

"What is that matter?" Rudbury asked.

"I will tell ye in as few words as possible," the old ranger promised. "When I uster know this heur town, in th' good old days when it was known as Button-hole, it was in a free kentry. Now it seems ter be on some furrin stile, an' native-born American citizens ain't allowed ter approach it except in one direction. I was comin' up from th' south yesterday, an' th' fu'st I knowed I was blocked off by a reg'lar picket-line, an' that was what kept me out in th' Hills

over night mostly. Kin anybody tell me th' why an' wherefor of it all?"

"I can explain that for you, and so that you cannot fail to understand it," the Englishman volunteered. "That section of country is my own personal property, and I am determined that there shall be no trespassers upon it. If I put up notices to that effect, no one will regard them, so the only thing that I can do that will be effective, is just what I have done; namely, to put a picket-line around it. I am sorry that I have so greatly inconvenienced you, but you need not be caught that way again, now that you know about it."

"Wal, that beats th' Dutch!" the old ranger cried. "There must be somethin' in there that you are afraid somebody will steal. But, no matter. What is th' penalty, in case a feller happens ter stray inside o' that line, by mistake or otherwise?"

"There is no danger of anything of the sort happening," was the retort, and as he gave the answer the Britisher turned and walked back into the saloon.

Attention now returned to Sweetwater Saul and his mule.

There was not a person in the crowd who yet believed the twin-brother story. The evidence of their own eyes was altogether against it.

"You mean ter say that you ain't Sweetwater Saul, do ye?" one old citizen interrogated.

"Goodness me!" the old mountaineer cried, "did you ever hear tell of a Brayton that would tell a lie when th' truth would answer every purpose? Haven't you never heard Saul speak about his brother Noah? That is rather strange, if ye hain't. We is th' twinest twins that you ever see'd; which is ter say that there never was twins that looked more alike than we does. Why, we was born with th' same kind o' clothes on, an' we have managed ter dress about th' same ever since. When Saul turns up, you won't be able ter tell t'other from which. Ain't I right, Riddles?"

"Th' resemblance is sartainly strikin'," the old ranger owned.

"So they'll all say, when they come ter see us tergether. An' now if any of ye kin tell me whar Saul's stoppin'-place is, an' whar he keeps this tarmal mule, I'll go thar, with my friend heur, an' take possession till he turns up, if he ever does."

This was the best stroke yet, and the question of doubt was firmly established in many minds.

Some one in the crowd volunteered to show the way, and, Saul leading the mule and Riddles following after with his dog, they followed the guide.

As for Richley, who had been their companion to the place, he was now counted out, they having done for him all that hospitality required.

When they were gone from the saloon, then the crowd turned to Richley with an avalanche of questions. Where had he fallen in with the two old Westerners? Did he know anything about them more than they had told? Was this man really not Sweetwater Saul, but a brother? Who was Old Riddles?

This last question several others present were able to answer to the satisfaction of all, for the Rocky ranger was known, by name at least, from one end of the chain to the other, almost.

The other points of inquiry were handled adroitly by Richley, and, whether he knew anything or not, or whether he suspected anything, he said nothing to damage the story told by the two old mountain veterans.

Lord Rudbury remained only a short time at the saloon, and then went over to the office of his mine.

He wanted to see his son.

Stavendish was there in the office, and greeted his father when he entered.

"The very deuce is to pay," the old gentleman blurted out, as he took off his hat and slapped it down on a chair.

"What do you mean?" the son inquired.

"Just what I say. The very deuce is to pay."

"How is that?"

"That old rascal of a Sweetwater Saul has just appeared in town."

Stavendish lay back in his chair and laughed.

"Oh, you can laugh, but it is just as I tell you," the old man insisted. "I have just seen him."

"That is all right," the younger man humored, "but you are mistaken. Your eyes have played you a trick."

"How do you know they have? Were you there?"

"No, I was not there, but I was somewhere else, and saw something else. The thing you name is simply an impossibility."

"You are sure of that?"

"I can swear to it."

"No chance for mistake?"

"None whatever. What has come over you? Do you suppose that I do not know what I am talking about?"

"I suppose you do, but the evidence of my own eyes is to have some weight. I tell you that I have seen either Sweetwater Saul or his ghost, and that only a very short time ago."

"If it was positively one or the other, it has

been his ghost," the young man declared, with positive assurance.

"Well, you have made my mind a great deal easier than it was. I thought I would put it at you strong in the first place, and see if there was any chance for his return to town. Seeing there is none, his story must be taken as true."

"And what is his story?"

"That he is a twin brother to Saul, and is here looking for him."

"Well, that is certainly reasonable enough, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose it is, but the looks of the man raised the doubt. Why, if you were to see him, you would swear that it is Saul and no one else."

"There are often cases of striking resemblance, even where there is no relationship, and in the case of twins, as these surely must be, there is nothing remarkable about it."

"I am glad there is no doubt about the matter in your mind, for I was afraid that there would be. Now you must give me the same reason for confidence that you have yourself. Tell me the whole thing."

The younger man leaned forward and delivered a few words in whispers, after which the senior leaned back and laughed.

"By Harry!" he exclaimed, "but you could afford to be confident. Every bit of doubt is gone now. It is a very, a very striking case of resemblance, but that is all it is. You must try and see this man before he goes away again."

"I shall do so, for you have aroused my interest."

The Britisher went out and went home, leaving his son to laugh over the matter, and to comment upon it at his leisure.

In the mean time Sweetwater Saul and Old Riddles had been conducted to the place where Sweetwater made his headquarters.

It was a little shanty on the outskirts of the town, and in one side of it was a place for the mule.

Sweetwater made some very scathing remarks about his brother's evidently insane fondness for the mule, for the benefit of the ears of the man who had guided them there, in all of which Old Riddles heartily coincided.

When the guide was gone they had it out. The merits and demerits of both the dog and the mule were shown up in every possible light.

When the two old fellows tired of that, they came down to things of more immediate importance.

"Wal, what d'ye think o' th' case?" the old ranger asked.

"I think it is goin' ter get b'ilin' hot, afore we git done with it," was Saul's answer. "You will see fun."

"So I think, too."

"An' now that you are here, an' th' case stands about th' same as it did at th' time when I posted that notice on your cabin door, we will set out fer that kentry o' brimstone an' red-fire as soon as opportunity offers."

"I agree ter that, fer I am interested in th' thing now, an' want ter see th' end of it."

"If it don't see th' end of us."

"It will be for us to look out for that. Well, let's take a good rest, and set out ter see th' sights o' th' town ter-night. It is many a day since I was at Button-hole last time, an' th' town has growed."

"All right; an' don't you fergit that my name is Noah, an' not Saul."

"That's Saul right," responded Riddles, gravely, with one of his feeble attempts at a pun.

CHAPTER XIX.

LIGHT ON THE SCENE.

THE two Rocky Mountain graybeards were enjoying a quiet chat about old times, after having partaken of supper, and while awaiting the proper hour to set out to see the sights of the town, when there came a rap at the door.

At a motion from Sweetwater Saul, Old Riddles got up and answered it.

As soon as he had done so, a man stepped into the room.

The intruder was a man of medium hight, with a pair of sharp and intelligent eyes, and was rather good-looking. He was of strong build, and was clad in an ordinary business suit. He wore a heavy, graceful mustache, but his face was otherwise cleanly shaved.

"You don't seem to recognize me," he observed, after a momentary spell of silence all around.

"I have seen ye afore," declared Riddles, "but ding blast my sister's pet cat if I kin remember whar it was."

"Nor you, either, I presume," turning to Saul.

"Can't say that I know ye," confessed Sweetwater, "though I've seen yer mug afore."

"Then I have got the better of you," the stranger averred, with a light laugh as he shut the door and advanced and took a seat.

"You have got somethin' else, too, I should say," observed Riddles.

"And what may that be?" the man asked.

"Plenty of cheek and nerve," was the quiet answer.

The man laughed heartier than ever.

"Perhaps you are right," he confessed, "per-

haps you are right. But it stands a man in hand to have a little of both in these times. Now to show you that I know you, as I claim, I will tell you who you are. Then I will tell you who I am. You," addressing the Rocky ranger, "are Old Zeb Horn, better known as Old Riddles, the Rocky ranger; and you," to Saul, "are Saul Brayton, familiarly called Sweetwater Saul. Have I hit it right?"

"You have kem pooty close," Saul confessed, "but you didn't quite hit me. I am my twin brother, Noah."

Both the stranger and Old Riddles threw back their heads and laughed long and loud. Sweetwater had put his foot in it clear up to his knee.

"I am my twin brother, Noah," the old ranger iterated, as soon as he could get his breath to speak; "that is about th' best I ever heard—it is, by hokey!"

"I meant ter say that I am Saul's twin brother," cried Sweetwater, angrily.

"In goes the other foot," laughed the stranger.

"What are ye talkin' about, anyhow?" demanded Riddles.

"I hardly think you can play the 'double' role with any degree of success," remarked the stranger, before Saul could reply. "You have undertaken a pretty difficult task, and you will have to keep your wits well about you to carry it out."

"Who in blazes be you?" Saul growled.

"Ah, yes; I did promise to tell you who I am, didn't I. Well, I am none other than your guest, or lodger, of last night—Paul Richley."

"Th' doost you are!"

So both the old mountain veterans exclaimed at once.

The man was indeed so greatly changed in appearance that they were blameless in not recognizing him. The stubby beard was gone, making him look ten years younger, and now the garb he wore was that of civilization throughout.

"Yes, it is I, my friends," he assured, "and I have come to pay you a call. I want to say right at the start, now, that I understand you perfectly well, and that you shall have my help as far as it can be given."

"We don't ketch on," said Riddles.

"Then I must give you a better hold. I understand that you, Sweetwater Saul, desire to have it thought that you are missing or dead, and that you are playing the part of a twin brother. Don't deny it, for you have just given it away badly. That is no matter, though, as it happens, for I am your friend. You are Noah Brayton, and I have known you for a long time—about twenty-four hours, in fact, but that is our business; and there is no lie in the statement, for twenty-four hours would be a mighty long time under some circumstances."

"Wal, suppose you are right, which I don't say you be," debated Saul, "what about it all?"

"Only this: Go right ahead with the game, if you think you can carry it out, and I will help you all I can."

"What game are you talkin' about?"

"The game of finding out what the secret of this town is!"

Saul looked at Riddles, and Riddles looked at Saul. What did this man know? Who and what was he? Where had he got hold of the clew to their business? These were questions that presented themselves to their minds in rapid succession.

"I see you are wondering what I know, how I came to know it, and who I am," Richley remarked.

These correct guesses at their very thoughts caused them to wonder more than ever.

"You hit it about right, mister," the old ranger admitted.

"Well, I am not prepared to shed much light on these points yet," Richley observed, "but I will let you into it all, sometime. One thing I will say, however, and that is this: You can count me as your friend. And, by the way, I may want the service of just such men as you are, before long, to pilot me around through the hills, and shall call upon you."

"Wal, I reckon that you will find us ready ter hire, if we are ter be found when wanted," said Saul, "but it is a question whether we'll be found or not. Hey, Riddles?"

"That is about th' size of it."

"You think of going away, then?"

"Jest so."

"Not very far, however, I venture to guess."

"Mebby funder, an' mebbly not quite so fur," the Rocky ranger parried.

"Well, that is all right," observed Richley, smiling, "but now, let me give you a little light on a certain point."

"Go right ahead," invited Saul, "fer light is jest what we are after, an' it is a thing honest men can't have too much of."

"Right you are. And now pay attention to what I say: I have traveled some in my time, and once spent about four years in India. I understand the language of that country—"

"Great rumblin' yearthquakes! is that so?" ejaculated Old Riddles.

"It is just as I tell you; and, I understood the conversation that passed between Lord Rud-

bury and those two miserable dogs of his this afternoon."

"Ding bast it, why didn't you let on that you did, an' if everything wasn't jest as it orter be, why didn't you let out on 'em?"

"That would not have served my ends, and I want you to keep it a profound secret that I have told you. You have my secret, and I have yours. It is about an even thing, you see."

"Oh, we'll hold it fast enough," promised Saul.

"Yes, you kin rely on us fer that," vouched Riddles. "But," he added, "let us inter what it was he said to 'em, will ye?"

"Yes, of course. The drift of the talk went to prove that that Englishman is a rascal of the deepest dye, and a villain at heart. This is saying serious things of him, but it will all come to light sooner or later. In the mean time, hold it fast between your teeth. He questioned the fellows concerning where and how they had been found, and they replied that they had been taken when they were just about to drop upon us and strangle us. That did not agree well with his translation of it. Further, I could understand that they had been acting under orders. Now, who it was they were after, I do not know, but it was evidently one of you, and they were surprised to find three of us there instead of one."

"Jest what I thought," muttered Sweetwater Saul. "There is somethin' mighty rotten in th' leetle kentry o' Denmark, an' I knowed it."

"It begins ter look more an' more that way," agreed Riddles.

"Further," Richley went on, "he cursed them for being clumsy, blundering fellows, and told them that if they ever got caught again he would allow the town to hang them. He said he could get them out of the trouble, but would not do it again. And, he further directed them to keep their eyes open and not let another chance slip."

"That looks rather as though he was in with 'em," reasoned the Rocky ranger, aloud.

"Rather," concurred Saul, laconically.

"And it suggests a little piece of advice to you both," Richley continued, "and that is this: You want to take the best of care that those fellows do not steal a march on you. You will have to keep your eyes open, both asleep and awake."

"You kin bet that we are safe on that score," boasted Old Riddles, "fer old Napoleon heur wouldn't see his marster git inter a diffikilty as long as he kin wag his honest old tail. Would ye, Nap?"

The dog roused up from its sleep and gave a lazy yawn in response.

"That is right," sneered Sweetwater, "brag up yer homely, kink-tailed cur. I want ter know where my mule, Polly Ann, comes in. What did she do, when th' fellers kem a-sneakin' down on us this mornin', an' you an' your dorg both was afeared ter go fer 'em? Wasn't it Polly Ann that h'isted her hind foot an' sent one of 'em a-kickin'?"

"Jest like a ornery mule, every time," retorted Riddles; "she would 'a' done th' same thing if it had been me that was comin'."

"I don't doubt that," Saul fired back, "fer she has a wonderful instinct fer knowin' rascals from honest men."

"An' seems ter prefer ter be owned by sich," retorted Riddles. "If she didn't, she wouldn't stay twenty-four hours with you, that is sartain."

"Come, come, friends," this won't do, Richley pacified. "You must not quarrel in this way. If you do, it will be of no use for Saul to try to play the part of twin brother to himself."

"Bless ye, we ain't quarrelin'," assured Sweetwater; "that is th' way we have o' playin'. Ain't that so, Zeb?"

"I reckon it be," agreed Riddles; and then they both grinned like two great school-boys.

"Well, it is rather a unique way of playing, I must confess," commented their guest. "You will have to watch yourselves, that it does not lead to something more. I must now be going. I suppose you will be out to see the show to-night?" in a questioning tone.

"What show?" they asked.

"Why, Professor Chipper A. Quick, with his trained birds and beasts. He has hired the Bison's Head, and everybody is on fire to see th' performance."

"We hadn't heard on't," confessed Riddles, "but all th' same you kin gamble that we'll be thar. What d'ye say, old quarrelsome?"

"I ruther guess we will," agreed Saul.

Some further talk was had, and then their new-made friend took his leave.

CHAPTER XX.

SOMETHING BRAND NEW.

THE town of Rudbury was all astir with excitement.

Everybody and his neighbor was on hand to see the coming show, and they could hardly contain themselves till the opening hour came round.

It was a new experience, to have the door of the Bison's Head shut against them, and they were more than eager to get in.

It was a surprise to most of the citizens of the

town, that the fellow had been able to secure such a place as the Bison's Head wherein to hold his show, but the secret of it was guessed by some of the harder and wiser heads.

The tramp showman had not been idle during the forenoon, but had been here, there, and everywhere, showing some trifling trick or other, and thus advertising his coming performance, though at that time he had secured no place where he could hold it.

The interest grew, people began to talk about it, and after a time it was plain to everybody that the fellow would reap a goodly harvest.

When it had come to this stage, then the fellow went to the proprietor of the Bison's Head and began to negotiate for the use of that place. At first he met with no success, at the hands of Gallagher, but at last, when the proprietor had taken the matter to the real owner, and he had looked into it, the request was granted, on the condition that the owner was to have half of the receipts at the door.

Rudbury had measured the public pulse, so to say, and knew there was a big thing in it, and hence his agreement.

And thus some of the far seeing ones had reasoned it out.

It had been discovered that the fellow had a big back-pack, too, and people wanted to know what was in that. But that was easily guessed. In order to follow the calling of showman, he had to have a little stock of properties, and it was of this that the pack consisted.

Among other things that it contained, was a muslin transparency, on which was set forth in glowing letters a card announcing the performance, etc. This was fixed to a folding-frame, so that it could be packed into a very small compass, and when night settled over the town it was found posted up in front of the Bison's Head, with lighted candles inside.

It set forth the coming event as follows:

"CHIPPER A. QUICK'S

"GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH!"

"Trained creatures of the beast and fowl kingdoms
"that can do everything, even to talking!"

"DO NOT MISS IT!"

"DOORS OPEN AT 8 SHARP."

As the hour drew near, the street in front of the saloon was packed with a surging crowd of people, and the proprietor of the place looked out upon them with an air of great satisfaction.

Here would be a golden harvest such as he had not lately seen. He could now almost forgive the showman's belligerent billy-goat, as a certain share of the receipts would drop into his own pocket and not all into that of the Englishman.

At a few minutes to eight, the showman made his appearance, clad in a very shabby dress suit, and stepping up on a chair that he had brought out with him, he addressed the crowd:

"Gentlemen and others," he began, "I am now about ready to open my performance. I have come out heur ter tell ye what ter do an' what not ter do. In th' fu'st place, take your time about it. Th' show won't begin till you are all gathered in. In th' next place, have yer bullion ready at th' door, th' exact change if ye kin, an' so save time an' trouble. In th' next place, try an' keep orderly when ye git in, fer if there is much noise an' confusion th' critters don't perform so well. In th' next place, th' galoot that don't want ter observe these simple rules and regulations had better keep away. Please don't bother th' performers by sendin' up boo-kays durin' th' actin'. They can be sent around later."

With this he made a bow and retired.

A wild cheer greeted the speech, and in a very brief period, then, the doors were thrown open.

Instantly there was a wild stampede, and the doors were quickly shut again, before the press was too great, and then the showman's head came out at the top of a window.

"It is jest as I thought it would be," he cried. "You have all got too much 'go' in ye. You must take it cool, or there will be no show. Now mind that."

The rush thus checked, the doors were opened again, and the crowd began to pour in in an orderly manner, each man paying as he passed.

Among others were Old Riddles and Sweetwater Saul.

They were as orderly as the best of them, and for the time being their quarrel over the merits of their dog and mule was laid on the shelf.

They succeeded in getting a good seat down near the center front, where they were bound to have a good view of all that took place.

A temporary stage had been erected, and in front of this, held up by various strings, was a calico curtain. Music was heard, and it sounded suspiciously like a harmonica. Such it was, in the hands of the showman himself, who was standing behind the curtain.

The room filled rapidly, and in a little time the crowd in the street had disappeared. Not a man of it was left.

At eight o'clock sharp the showman laid aside his orchestra, and taking hold of the various

strings of the curtain, proceeded to "yank" it up.

A cheer greeted him, and when the curtain had been properly secured he responded with a bow.

"Gentlemen," he said, this time not making mention of any other class, "you are assembled here ter see one of th' greatest performances of which this great an' glorious kentry kin boast. An' you kin take my word fer it that you won't be disappointin'. We are all heur, the hull lot of us, an' now, with your kind permission, th' show will open."

Another cheer.

The fellow stepped down from the stage now, and disappeared behind another curtain at the back of it, and in a moment the rooster, G. Washington, came into sight and strutted forward to the footlights, where it stretched its neck and uttered a loud crow.

The "footlights," by the way, were not there, but the rooster advanced to the line where they ought to have been.

"Gentlemen of th' town o' Rudbury," the rooster then went on to say, in a tone that sounded not unlike its usual clarion crow, but in words that were distinctly audible all over the hall, "I greet you. You want ter understand right at th' start that I am cock of th' walk in this combination, an' that I am th' star of th' show. Don't let that git out of yer minds."

This little speech made, on came the goat.

It, too, came forward to the front, and made its bow.

"Galoots o' Button-hole—that uster be," it seemed to say, "how do I find ye all this evening? Hello! there is Gallagher. Gallagher, how are you? I hope you don't hold no grudge ag'in' me, do ye? If ye do, we kin settle it some other time. This rooster here has been blowin' about his bein' th' cock o' th' walk, has he? I'd have ye all ter know that I am his butter every day in th' week. Ain't that so, Gallagher?"

Howls of laughter greeted this nonsense.

The goose, Susan, now made its appearance.

Down to the imaginary footlights it waddled, and took its place between the rooster and the goat.

"It makes me tired, it does," it said—or seemed to say, for of course it was the work of the ventriloquist behind the curtain, "ter hear th' boastin' of these two boasters. I am queen of th' company, an' I don't want you to think that I ain't. They call me a goose, but I ain't th' first goose that ever got stage-struck, an' that is all I want ter say at present."

Into sight now trotted the lively porker, with a loud squeal, its master having given its tail a lively twist at parting.

Down to the front it came, still squealing, and took up its station on the end opposite to the goat.

"I'm no hog," it proceeded to declare, "but at th' same time I want ter have my lip inter this mess. I had an agreement with th' manager that I was ter be th' only talkin' animile in th' troupe, an' here he has gone an' made 'em all talkers. What am I goin' ter do about it? If we wasn't so fur out on th' road, an' th' walkin' wasn't so had, I'd chuck up my 'greetment an' leave him in th' lurch."

"I think we could manage ter get along without you," observed the goat.

"We'd have more ter eat, that is sure," chimed in the rooster.

"An' a good deal less noise around," added the goose.

"You don't seem ter have a very exalted opinion of me," the pig sneered.

"You haven't come fur from th' truth," assured the goat.

"And you seem to think that the show could live without me," the pig further declaimed.

"Try it and see," challenged the rooster.

"Yes, fer we kin spare ye," drawled the goose; "we ain't proud of your company."

"I'd rather be a pig than a goose, any day," the porker declared stoutly.

"Here, here," exclaimed the master of the show, as he reappeared upon the stage, "what is going on here?"

Instantly the four creatures ran up to him, and then there was such a babble of confusion as is seldom heard. The four uttered the cries peculiar to their kind, and the man lent his ventriloquial powers to add to the confusion, making it seem as if they were all trying to talk at once, each to complain against the others.

"Hold on, hold on!" the showman shouted, sticking his fingers into his ears, "don't all talk at once! How do you suppose that I kin tell what any of ye is sayin'? Shut yer heads up, now, or I'll kick ye all clear off th' boards."

The creatures became instantly silent, evidently obeying some signal that the audience did not catch, and then the man addressed them further.

"A nice set of critters you be," he scolded, "ter come out here an' then set to quarrelin'; what will folks think of ye? Sweet William, don't you feel 'shamed o' yerself?"

"Y-yes, sir," the goat was made to respond.

"An' you, too, Pluto?"

The pig grunted.

"Yes, I should think you would, an' th' hull lot of ye. Now if you think you kin behave

yerselves we will go on with th' show, an' I hope you will do yer best. Now, git ter yer places."

A stamp of the foot was evidently the signal in this instance, and the four well-trained creatures returned to the places they had first taken upon coming out.

"Now, gentlemen," the showman announced, "the first thing on the programme will be a beautiful song entitled 'Rock Me to Sleep Mother,' by this world-famous quartet. The orchestra will please favor us with an accompaniment."

As he said this, the fellow whipped out his harmonica and started up a tune, and the effect upon the trained creatures was magical.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ATTACK IN THE DARK.

BEFORE proceeding further let us say a few words in regard to that assemblage, for it was thoroughly a mixed one.

In front, on the right hand side, were seated Lord Rudbury, his son, and their friends. On the left was a group of their English employees. Right in the front was another group, composed of their East-Indians. These numbered about twenty.

Behind these the crowd was made up of miners, teamsters, and the citizens of the town generally. Here and there the yellow face of a son of China was to be seen, and also two or three of the dark-skinned children of sunny Africa.

Towns of the Far West are made up of all sorts and conditions of men, without regard to race, color, or previous condition.

The crowd was orderly, and no portion of it more so than that composed of the Indians.

Old Riddles and Sweetwater Saul were seated a little way behind these, enjoying the fun immensely, and the old ranger was holding his faithful dog in his lap.

Just behind them sat their friend, Paul Richley.

"I'd be 'shamed o' m'self, if I was you," Saul nudged Riddles and whispered, "ter hold that homely purp in my lap. I'm disgusted with ye."

"Wal, ye needn't be!" Riddles retorted, "fer th' dog is jest as good as lots o' two-legged critters that I know. I reckon you'd have that ornery mule o' yourn in heur, if they'd 'low ye to, but they draw th' line at mules, as is right an' proper they should."

They would undoubtedly have said more, but it was just then that the showman announced the song, and the "orchestra" struck up the tune.

Immediately began one of the most infernal dins that can well be imagined. The pig began to squeal, the rooster to crow, the goose to "squawk," and the goat lent its voice in a series of noisy *baa-aa-aah's*.

If this was a song, then the crowd had enough of it right at the start.

Such an unearthly discord of inharmonious noises never before greeted human ears.

"Oh! let up, let up!" cried several.

"Yes, stop ther racket!" yelled others.

"Let 'em do ther singin' in deef an' dumb language?" was requested.

These and many other choice bits of advice were given, but the showman paid no attention to any of them until he had kept up the din for about a minute. Then, at a signal from him, it stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

"Fer th' love o' goodness, mister!" exclaimed Old Riddles, as soon as the uproar subsided, "don't let 'em do that ag'in. It most skart my dog inter fits."

"Pity it hadn't," whispered Sweetwater Saul.

"Sence ye don't seem ter know enough ter 'preciate good moosic when he hear it," the showman declaimed, "we won't sing any more, but will perceed ter amoose ye with a game at keurds, in which these trained critters will be th' players."

Dragging a broad, low box out upon the stage, the tramp showman turned it bottom-side up, and threw a pack of cards down upon it.

In a moment the four performers were there, one on each of the four sides of the box.

"See how eager they be ter play," the fellow bragged, waving his hand over them; "they can't hardly wait till I deal 'em out fer 'em. They are death on keurds, is these same pets o' mine."

Having said this, the man took up the cards, shuffled them, and began to deal them out.

"What be they goin' ter play?" somebody inquired.

"They will try a game o' eucher," the man replied.

Having dealt the cards and turned the trump, the showman next took the cards of each player and placed them in a little block made for the purpose, so they would stand up in sight.

This done, he settled down at a corner of the box, saying:

"Now, go it."

"What d'ye do with that?" the pig instantly asked.

"It wasn't your deal," disputed the rooster.

"It wasn't, eh?" was the retort; "I guess it was, then. Wasn't it, boss?" appealing to the showman.

"Yes, it was Pluto's deal," the man affirmed.

"Well, I pass," the rooster croaked.

"Same here," announced the goat.

"Here too," from the goose.

"I takes it up then, neighbors," the pig notified, and taking one of the five cards out of the block before it with its mouth, it put it face down on the box.

The man took up the trump-card and put it in place of it.

Now the game began. Each of the players in turn took a card out of its own block, dropped it down on the box, and the showman gathered them up and deposited the "tricks" where they belonged. And so it went on to the end of the game, accompanied with all the small talk that could have been thought of by as many human players.

We do not mean to say that the four creatures really played a game, but they did drop their cards in proper turn. The audience could not see the faces of the cards at any time, but the drift of the conversation kept them posted as to how the imaginary game progressed.

This performance drew forth a rousing round of applause from the crowd, for, with the ventriloquial powers of the showman to help it along, it had been the best thing of the kind they had ever seen.

"By hokey, but that war good!" exclaimed Old Riddles; and everybody echoed the sentiment.

The box and the cards cleared out of the way, the showman announced that the four trained pets would act a little pantomime.

He proceeded then to dress them up in ridiculous costumes, and when he was done, let them have the stage entirely to themselves.

Space does not permit us to set forth all they did in detail, but for fully half an hour the audience was kept in one continuous roar of laughter, and all were ready to vote that it was the best show they had ever seen. Not one there regretted the investment.

When that was over, the animals and fowls were taken off for a time, and the man presented himself and entertained the audience with tricks with cards, and some sleight-of-hand acts that were very creditable.

That over, he disappeared for a time, and presently returned with the pig, a howl of laughter greeting them.

The pig was walking on its hind legs, and was clad in a blue coat with bright buttons. On its head was a white wig, and a white beard was secured to its throat. It looked aged and venerable.

"Gentlemen," said the master of ceremonies, "allow me to introduce my trained pig in his best role as Pluto the Seer. He kin read th' future like an open book. Nothing is hid from him. He knows all things, and perhaps more. As fer th' past, it is in his mind never ter be blotted out. Now, any one in the audience is at liberty ter ask questions of him."

"Who killed Cock Robin?" some one immediately fired in.

"Th' Tom-cat," the pig immediately answered, in a deep voice. "Hist'ry is often at fault on sich p'int's."

A laugh followed, and that man had no more conundrums to put.

Here was a chance for Old Riddles that was not to be missed. Could he not give the "seer" a riddle that would "stump" it? Out came his book, and while a few other trifling questions were being put, he searched its pages to select a riddle that he thought would be equal to the occasion. Presently he found one.

"Mister," he said, "here is a leetle question I'd like ter ask that critter o' yourn: What great p'int o' difference is there between cuttin' off th' head of a elephant an' cuttin' off th' head of any other animal?"

"Th' p'int of th' knife?" the pig interrogated, promptly.

"No, sir," declared the old ranger. "I thought I could stick ye. Here is th' answer ter it: Th' great p'int o' difference is, that in cuttin' off th' head of a elephant you don't separate th' head from th' trunk."

"Very good, very good indeed," the ventriloquist caused the pig to say; "and now as turn about is fair play, old man, allow me ter ask you one."

"Sartainly, sartainly," the old ranger consented, greatly pleased.

"Well, here it is: What reason have we to suppose there are no eggs in San Domingo?"

The Rocky ranger had to scratch his head.

"I give it up," he said; "I guess that is one that ain't in my book. What is th' answer?"

"Well, th' reason we have ter suppose that there are no eggs in San Domingo is, because th' natives cast off th' yoke and banished th' whites."

Old Riddles was overpowered, and had no more to say.

"All this is very trifling," the showman now observed, "and does not reflect due credit upon the ability of Pluto. I hope some one in the audience, no matter who, will put a question or two of a different character; something that will bring out the powers of my pig as a seer."

A close observer would have noticed, per-

haps, that the showman did not at all times speak in his usual unlearned dialect.

"There is one question that I would like to ask," observed Paul Richley.

"Well, what is it?" the man inquired.

"Why is there a cordon of watchmen around a certain section of country just to the south of this town? I was a whole day trying to reach this place, but was not allowed to pass."

Lord Rudbury and his son exchanged glances of uneasiness.

"Why is it, Pluto?" the showman asked, turning to the pig.

"Know, oh ye people of Rudbury," proclaimed the porker, in deep tones, "that within that circle are secrets that are guarded with jealous care. Within that circle is the gateway that opens to the very domain of Satan. Know, oh ye—"

Here the Rudburys broke in with a loud clapping of hands and stamping of feet, which was soon taken up by the rest of the audience, and the building fairly thundered with applause.

Sweetwater Saul gave Old Riddles a nudge, and whispered:

"What did I tell ye?"

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Lord Rudbury, as the noise subsided, "that was a good stretcher; give us some more."

"Know, oh ye people of Rudbury," the pig started to go on, now in a loud voice, "that in your midst dwell devils incarnate, and that beneath you yawns the pit of perdition. That in that—"

Again loud laughter and thunders of applause, started by the Rudburys, interrupted, and in the midst of it the gas (the town had gas) was turned off, and the room was plunged in total darkness. Instantly a great uproar arose, there was a mad rush for the doors, and in the midst of it all the Rocky ranger suddenly felt a pair of bony hands grip his throat like hands of steel.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CLOSE CALL COMES.

THE attack upon Old Riddles was so fierce and so sudden that he was rendered instantly powerless. The wiry fingers seemed to cut into his flesh like knives, and his breath was cut off short.

Worst of all, he was held from behind, so that he had no chance to grapple with his foe.

But, and very fortunately for him, help was near at hand. There was a deep growl from his faithful dog, which ended in a snarl and snap, followed instantly by a human cry of pain, and quickly the fingers relaxed their hold and the old ranger was free.

He recovered his breath with a gasp, felt of his throat as though to assure himself that his head was secure, and ejaculated:

"Ding bast it, but that is what I call 'zasperatin'! Come, Nap, let's git out whar we kin tell friend from foe."

The first blindness following the putting out of the light was wearing away, and the window gave just light enough to make themselves seen. It was toward one these that the old man made a dash.

About that moment two pistol-shots were heard in quick succession in the rear end of the room, and they were both followed by sharp cries of pain. Each bullet had evidently found its prey.

"Riddles, whar be ye?" sung out Sweetwater Saul, and as it happened he was right at the old ranger's side.

"Heur I go," was the answer, and reaching out he caught hold of Saul's arm and dragged him along with him. "I'm makin' fer th' winder. Come on."

"I'm with ye," was the response.

It seemed as though pandemonium was turned loose.

The moment they reached the window Sweetwater Saul lifted one of his long legs and kicked the sash out with two or three strong kicks, and the dog, Napoleon, was the first to get outside.

Old Riddles followed immediately, and Saul followed him.

"Thar, that feels better, I should say," the Rocky ranger commented. "I tell ye I had a narrer squeeze in thar, an' only fer Nap heur I reckon I'd be a goner by this time."

"Why, what happened ye?" inquired Saul, in much surprise.

Riddles told him.

"It is jest as thought," Sweetwater commented, "an' th' Rudburys kicked up this mess jest ter keep that pig from sayin' what it was goin' ter say. You kin jest gamble on't that there is goin' ter be a ruction heur afore long."

"I believe you. But, what a mighty fuss they are keepin' up inside thar. I wonder who it was fired them shots?"

"Give it up; s'pose we'll find out when it's all over. Come, let's git around front. Keep yer top eye open so's they don't git th' best of ye. Heur, Nap, this way. Come on."

Several others had followed them out through the window, and they all went around to the front of the building now.

There the crowd was pouring out in a stream.

"I'd like ter know th' hound that turned th'

light out," some big fellow was vociferating, "an' there would be more of a rumpus around here than there is. That was a dirty mean trick ter play. Th' show was jest gettin' interestin'."

"Yas; too interestin' fer some," commented Sweetwater Saul, in an undertone to Riddles.

"Right you are, I opine," the old ranger agreed.

Just then they were joined by their friend Richley, who had just worked his way out with the crowd.

"Here you are, eh?" he exclaimed. "Glad you got out with whole skins. What do you think of things in general now?"

"The rottenness in Denmark ain't gettin' any better, an' that purty fast," declared Sweetwater.

The younger man laughed.

"You are right there," he agreed, "and it is bound to be worse before it gets better. Well, I guess the trouble is about over, and we will wait around and learn what the amount of damage is. I have an idea there will be at least two dead foreigners on the floor."

"Why, did you take a hand in that shootin'?" asked Riddles.

"I know who did," was the answer.

The place was now about emptied of the crowd, and pretty soon a light appeared within. "Come in," said Richley, "and we will see how they have fared."

In they went, and many others with them.

It was Gallagher, the proprietor of the place, who had relighted the gas.

"I'd like ter know what dirty cur turned that gas off," he was howling, "an' I'd make it warm fur him, you kin bet on that."

"I'll give fifty dollars to the man who will point him out," proclaimed the Englishman, apparently in great earnestness.

"Yes, and I'll make it fifty more," cried Stavendish, his son.

"It was about th' meanest trick that I ever see," raved Gallagher.

"Yes, and see the awful result of it," said Rudbury, and he waved his hand toward the other end of the room.

There on the floor lay two silent forms, and up on the temporary stage lay two more. It had cost four lives.

Paul Richley, the two old mountaineers, and many others, advanced to where the bodies lay.

The first in order was that of one of the East-Indians. In his hand he held a silken cord, similar to the ones we have seen them have on another occasion. His throat was terribly lacerated, showing plainly the teeth of some animal, and he was dead.

This was the victim of Old Riddles's dog.

"I kin tell ye what that feller died of," declared Riddles, giving the body a push with his foot. "He got his throat in th' way o' th' jaws o' my dog when th' dog went ter shut his mouth. Th' feller had holt o' my neck, mebbey ye kin see th' marks; an' th' dog jest throttled him in no time a-tall. That is th' sort o' dorg Nap is, every day in th' season."

"Who says that?" demanded the Britisher, firing up.

"I say it!" the old ranger boldly acknowledged.

"Then you must have attacked the fellow first," was the decision, "for these Indians of mine are the most peaceful fellows in the world."

"An' mebbey that pore feller attacked 'em fust, too," observed Sweetwater, as he pointed to where the next body lay.

That one was the body of a miner. He was a tall, gaunt fellow, not greatly unlike Saul in appearance. There was a red circle around his neck that showed the manner of his death.

"I haven't any doubt of it," was the Englishman's cool return.

Old Riddles pointed further.

"How about them two beauties up thar on th' stage?" he questioned. "Mebby they was killed an' put up thar fur fun, but it don't look so. I see they have got their wicked little strings in hand, as though they had meant business."

"Trying to make good their escape," the Englishman decided.

"That is a pooty good story," concluded Old Riddles, "but it won't go down with us. These fellers o' yours is after us, an' they are bound ter have us. We kin see jest as fur through th' board as th' next man. If they wasn't dead there would be a day o' reckonin', if there is any jestice ter be had in this town. When a feller takes holt o' my neck, there is gen'ly some reason fur it, an' it is mighty sartain that I haven't done anything to any o' yer tan-colored critters."

"Well, it has been a very unfortunate affair," Rudbury observed, cooling down, "and I am sorry it happened. I would give much to know who it was turned off the light."

"Where is the key that it is turned off with?" asked Paul Richley, calmly.

"Where is it, Gallagher?" the Britisher passed the question on.

"Over there," the proprietor explained, pointing to that side of the room where the Rudbury party had been seated.

"That is all I want to know," was the cool comment.

"Would you insinuate that we had anything to do with it?" demanded Stavendish Rudbury, hotly.

"Not for the world, sir," was the assurance.

Further inspection showed that the two Indians on the stage had been shot to the heart. Both of them had in hand their silken cords, and both had met the same fate.

The showman was not to be seen, nor were his trained creatures.

Just at this time he made his appearance. His head came out from under the stage, and he inquired:

"Is th' battle over? Is th' danger past? Will it be safe fer me ter show meself? If there is any more to come, jest say so, an' I'll stay where I am."

"You had better come out, you rascal," cried Rudbury, "for this is your fault. If you hadn't come here with your infernal show, it would not have happened."

"Now that is th' unkindest cut of all," the showman complained, in a mournful tone. "Only a minute ago you was stompin' and clappin' and praisin' th' show fer all you was wuth, an' now you are dead ag'in' it. Sich is fickle human nature."

Everybody was talking, and the room was full of subdued excitement. What had created the fight, could not be guessed, even though the lights had been turned out. The Indians were gathered in one corner of the room, in a frightened group, and seemed to be terrorized.

The Englishman shouted at them in fierce tones, and they made answer in very weak ones.

"I knew it," Rudbury cried, after talking a moment with them; "they say that they were attacked from behind, and that they had to fight for their lives. Who can blame them for doing that? The poor devils got the worst of it."

There was one person on hand who paid close attention to what had been said to the Indians, and that was Richley. A smile now played around his mouth for a moment.

Just at that instant there was a shot fired, and the bullet grazed the face of Sweetwater Saul close enough to bring the blood through the skin. It was the closest call he had ever had in that manner.

Where had the shot come from?

There was no one who evidently knew, for barely had the report been heard when Richley flashed forth a revolver, and sent a return bullet crashing through a window in the rear of the room.

It was all done so quickly that it was some moments before the crowd learned what it all meant.

"I saw the hand that fired that shot," Richley said, "but I was not quick enough to bring the fellow down. Come, we had better get away from these quarters."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BROUGHT TO THE GROUND.

LEADING the way, Richley ran out of the saloon, Old Riddles and Sweetwater Saul following close after him.

"Dodge around the other way," Richley directed, as he himself turned in one direction, "and see if we can catch the fellow."

"Kerrect," responded the old ranger, and he and Saul ran around the other side.

All were armed, Saul having provided himself with weapons since his arrival in town.

They did not catch their man. He was nowhere to be seen, and they all met in the rear of the saloon.

"He has made good his escape, just as I thought he would," said Richley. "It is too bad that we could not get hold of him."

"Right ye are, fer I'd like the pleasure o' wringin' his neck," vowed Sweetwater Saul.

"Well, let's mosey right on, seein' that we've got nothin' more ter do here," suggested Old Riddles. "I don't like bein' fired at from under cover an' at short range."

"Can't say that I hanker arter it myself," joined Saul, "so I'm with ye."

The three moved away from there without loss of time, and were soon out upon the street and going in the direction of the hotel.

"The excitement is piling right on," remarked Richley, the first to speak after striking the street.

"By hokey! but I should say it was," echoed Old Riddles.

"Did you see that feller that fired at me?" asked Saul.

"Yes. I happened to be looking right in that direction," answered Richley.

"Then ye see'd his face?" from Old Riddles.

"Yes, but only for a brief instant. The moment the flash and report came I had my eyes there, and just caught a glimpse of the fellow."

"An' would ye know him ag'in'?"

"No; the sight I had of him was too limited for that. We may find out in some other way who he was, however."

"After he has plugged one or two of us, eh?" from Saul.

"I must tell you that you have every reason to look out for your lives," the younger man warned. "Some one here in this town is after

you, and it is not at all unlikely that the same person is after me, too."

"You mean that Englisher," guessed Riddles.

"The same," Richley admitted.

"Have you heard anything new?" inquired Saul. "I mean in that gibble-gabble talk he had with them tan-colored imps o' perdition o' his."

"Well, yes, if it may be called new, knowing what we already did. You know he spoke to them very sharply, after we all went back into the saloon after the scare was over."

"Yes."

"Well, he cursed them roundly for a lot of blundering lunkheads, as he poetically expressed it, and demanded to know what they meant by such work. They answered by holding him responsible for the lives of their dead comrades, and demanded to be taken back to their own land again."

"Then it is a clear case that somethin' awful rotten is goin' on," concluded the Rocky ranger, "an' that he is afraid that we will go fer him if we find it out."

"Yes; or more than likely he thinks that you and your friend here already know something, and wants to make sure that you will not tell of it. As you say, though, there is something wrong, and I am eager to learn what it is."

They were now near the hotel, and a young man coming in the opposite direction stopped when he met them and exclaimed:

"Why, Mr. Horn, I am glad to see you here. I am glad to see that you got here all safe and sound."

It was Random Pepperly, the young man of the velocipede, or more correctly saying—bicycle.

"Hello, younker!" the old ranger greeted him, "you did get here, didn't ye? What have ye done with that wheel critter o' yours? Whar d'ye stable it?"

"Oh, that is in the hotel. Where is your mule?"

"My friend heur laid claim ter that when I fell in with him, as it was th' property o' his dead—or at any rate, missin'—brother. Where ye headin' fur?"

"Oh, just out for a walk, that is all. Guess I will go down to the Bison's Head. Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

"No objections ter doin' that," the old ranger drawled. "This," with a wave of his hand toward Sweetwater Saul, "is Noah Brayton, a brother to one Saul Brayton, that owned a homely critter of a mule, an' who was better known as Sweetwater Saul. An' this other," indicating Richley, "is one Mr. Richley. This feller-critter, my friends," waving toward the young man, "is Mr. Seldom Pep—"

"Random," the young man corrected.

"Beg yer parding. Mr. Random Pepperly, gentlemen, who rides 'round th' kentry on a two-wheeled jigger."

This form of introduction was rather unique, but it was taken all in good part by the young man, who put out his hand with admirable frankness, saying:

"I am delighted beyond telling to know you, gentlemen. Let us shake hands and be jolly. No doubt our old friend here has told you all about our meeting yesterday, and the adventures we had."

While saying this, he grabbed both of their hands and shook them before they could hardly escape if they had felt inclined to do so.

"No, we have heard nothing of you before," confessed Richley; "our friend must have forgotten the incident."

"Very likely, very likely."

"Er else didn't think it wu'th rememberin'," advanced Saul.

"Very likely, very likely," the young man agreed with that, too. "But, no matter, let us be jolly. Which way you going?"

He was making himself exceedingly friendly. "Wal, we was jest headin' fur th' hotel heur," explained Riddles, "an' then I opine we'd soon be strikin' fur our roostin'-place. Whar be you goin'?"

"Just where I told you—down to the Bison's Head. Won't you join me? Come down and have a quiet glass of something good at my expense."

"We have just come from there," said Richley, "and speaking for myself, I do not care to go back—at least not at present. Is it possible that you were not there to see the show? You missed a great thing, and an after-piece that was not down on the bills."

"Is that so? What was it? I knew about the show, and wanted to see it, but I lay down for a nap late this afternoon, and did not awake until a short time ago. I missed it, you see. What was the after-piece?"

They gave him an outline of it.

"Well," he instantly decided, "if that is the way things are there, dead men lying all around, I guess I will not go either, just now. I will join you and return to the hotel with you, with your permission."

"Young man," said Old Riddles, raising his finger as though talking over something of the greatest importance with his dog, "listen ter me: You kain't have our permission ter do that thing. We don't want ye. I know that is

rather blunt, but that is th' truth of th' matter, an' I am th' sort o' man that don't take no stock in hidin' th' truth from a feller-critter, whether it suits him or not. I don't like th' cut o' yer outfit. I have been civil to ye, but that is all that I kin be. I think that I told you once afore that I don't like Britishers, an' allus did, an' I guess I like 'em less'n ever. I also told ye that I couldn't strike up an undyin' love an' affection fer ye, nor take ye inter partnership. My mind is still th' same way."

The young man was greatly taken aback. The old ranger had greeted him so well that he hardly knew what to say to this, apparently. What he did say, however, went to prove that his meeting with the three was not altogether accidental.

"I—I—you take me by surprise," he ejaculated. "I thought we were on good terms. I—I had something to say to you about a certain party that you asked me about when we were together."

"What party was that?" Riddles demanded.

"You asked me if I knew anything of a person called Sweetwater Saul."

"So I did."

"Yes, and I told you that I had not. Since getting back to town, however, I have asked around, and I have learned something about him."

"Have ye, really?" chimed in Sweetwater himself at this point; "what have ye heard? That same Sweetwater is a brother o' mine, an' I am heur a-lookin' fer him."

The young man showed the greatest surprise. "That is remarkable," he observed, "for you were pointed out to me this afternoon as being that person, and I was just going to say to my old friend here that he had been lucky enough to find you; but it seems that my information would not have been of much use."

"Oh, we have heard that old story a hundred times sence we kem ter town," the old mountaineer said, in a tone of disgust.

If it had been the young man's idea to lead the old mountaineer into a betrayal of his identity, he had missed his mark. The old fellow had proved too sharp for him.

Before anything more could be said, something startling happened. Whether it had been noticed or not, the young Englishman had been keeping a distance of a few feet between himself and the three others, and had not approached nearer except when he had shaken hands with Saul and Richley.

They were not far from the hotel, as has been said. On the right of them was a wide open space where there was no building. There it was all dark, but it was quite light where the men were standing.

Suddenly out of this darkness came a bright flash, with a simultaneous report like the loud crack of a whip, and a bullet flew so close to the head of Old Riddles that he felt the wind of it upon his face.

"Blarst the reckless idiot!" cried the young Englishman, "he will hit somebody if he don't look out;" and without taking time to say any more he turned and ran for the hotel as fast as he could go.

Not so the others. Their revolvers flashed forth instantly, and they all opened fire in the direction from which the shot had come. It was done so quickly, and they poured in such a rain of bullets, that the would-be murderer had barely a chance in a hundred for escape.

Nor did he escape. Out of the darkness came a cry of pain, telling plainly that he had been hit.

Old Riddles and Sweetwater Saul started for the spot on a run, and Richley, springing to a lamp-post and robbing it of its lamp, started after them, carrying the light with him.

They soon found their man. He was a rough-looking fellow, and he was down on the ground writhing in mortal pain. He had been hit in a vital spot, and his life was to be measured by brief seconds. In his right hand he held a smoking revolver, while with the other he was clawing frantically at his breast.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SETTING OUT FOR THE DOMAIN.

"It sarves ye right, ye infarnel skunk, ye!" cried Old Riddles; "what did ye try ter kill me fer?"

"That's ther question," Sweetwater Saul backed, "what did ye do it fer?"

Richley was more immediately practical and to the point. He dropped down on one knee beside the fellow, and held the light where he could get a good look at his face.

He did not recognize him, nor did either of the others.

"Who hired you to do this thing?" he demanded.

"Oh! I'm done fur! I'm done fur!" the poor wretch groaned aloud; "can't ye do nothin' fur me?"

"Yes, you are surely done for, as you call it," confirmed Richley, "and the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it all, and then spend your short time in trying to make peace with your Maker. Otherwise your immortal soul will be eternally lost, and that will be far worse than losing your grip on this life."

The man fairly screamed in pain and terror.

"Come, tell us all you can," Richley urged.

"I—I was told ter do it," the man gasped, "but I'm glad I missed. I—I sho, ter kill."

"Which one was it ye shot at?" asked Old Riddles.

"That one," and he pointed at Saul.

"It was, eh?" cried Saul. "I'd like ter know who put ye up ter it. Come, out with it, afore yer pump stops."

The man had not ceased to writhe and groan dismally, and now with the terrors of death upon him, and his sinful career passing before him in review, he made the night hideous with his howlings.

"Stop yer infernal yawpin'," admonished Sweetwater. "That won't mend th' bullet holes that's in ye, an' it won't stop yer sperrit from leakin' out. You're in th' jaws o' death fast an' sure. I'm sorry fer ye, o' course, but you're jest whar ye tried ter put me, an' it sarves ye right. Now you'd better hurry an' tell us all ye kin, an' so ease yer mind a leetle."

"Yes, my man," urged Richley. "If you mean to say anything do not delay about it, for your time is short."

"What was th' name o' th' p'izen critter?" importuned Riddles.

Others were by this time gathering around, attracted there by the cries and the flashing light.

"I—I'll tell ye, I—I—I'll tell ye th'—hull thing," the man gasped, his voice growing perceptibly weaker; "only lift me up a little."

Richley was quick to do that.

"I—I was hired ter do that job," the dying man made an effort to say, "an' th' man—th' man what hired me was—was—"

"Hello! hello here! What's th' racket? What's goin' on?"

Half a dozen men came running up in a body just at this important moment, and their exclamations were so loud and urgent that the man's words could not be heard.

"Shut up," ordered Richley, "till I can hear what this dying man has to say."

"Shut up yerself," vociferated the man in the lead, "an' mind who ye're talkin' to. Who is that feller thar?"

"Why, that is my pard!" exclaimed another.

"Who downed him?"

"Then let's be doin' somethin' fur him," proposed yet another. "These fellers would let him die fer th' sake o' hearin' him try ter talk. No doubt he's tryin' ter beg 'em ter take him ter some place whar his wound kin be seen ter."

"It is no use," declared Richley, "for he has only a very few minutes of life left, and he had better make the very best use of it he can. He tried to murder one of our party, and we want to find out who put him up to do it."

"What! Jim tried ter murder one of ye!" exclaimed the man who owned the fellow as his pard. "That ain't so. That ain't th' kind o' man Jim is."

"You are altogether wrong there," contradicted Richley, "for he has just confessed that he did, and he is ready to own who hired him to do it. Now please keep still for a moment—"

"Nary a keep!" they all cried, and pressing forward, they knocked Richley over the body of the dying man, and pushed Old Riddles and Sweetwater Saul back.

"Ding bast it!" cried Riddles, "but you won't have it all yer own way, not if we know it, and he brought his revolver to bear upon them and ordered them off."

Sweetwater backed him, and it was only a second when Richley was upon his feet, his weapons, too, in hand.

"Back with you," he sternly ordered, "or you will be in the same fix that your fellow rascal is in!"

It was done so quickly that the others were more or less surprised, and seeing that the three men meant business, they lost no time in obeying the order.

"Up with your hands, too!" Richley commanded.

Up they went. It was a command not to be disregarded. Even the Rocky ranger and his "pard" were not a little surprised at the sternness of manner with which the words were sent forth. It came to their minds that this was not the first order of the sort their new-found friend had given in his life, and they realized that he was one born as it were to command.

"And now stand there," he further ordered. "If they move so much as a finger tunnel them," he added, to his two old friends.

The crowd, now numbering a score or more, was effectually held in check, and without the delay of a moment Richley knelt again beside the dying man.

But it was now too late.

"Come, that name?" he eagerly interrogated.

The dying wretch made an effort to reply, but his strength was gone, and with a groan he expired.

"Well," Richley remarked, rising up and speaking to the man who had balked him, "your little game worked well, and you have won this trick. Take your dead man and do what you please with him. Bear in mind his fate, and do not you try the same game he did. We know you are all in the same boat."

With weapons still in hand, Richley and the two Graybeards backed away from the spot, leaving the light on the ground where it had been placed, and keeping the crowd covered until they themselves were well under cover of the darkness at the rear of the hotel. Then they turned and hastened away toward the abiding-place of Sweetwater Saul.

When they arrived there, and entered, Richley directed that the door and windows be closed and secured.

"Our lives are not safe a minute here," he said, when this had been done and they had sat down to talk the situation over.

"That is where ye hit it," agreed Old Riddles, "an' we shell have ter have eyes on every side of our heads."

"There is goin' ter be somethin' of a fight afore we are done with this thing, an' don't fergit that," predicted Sweetwater.

"And it has already begun," finished Richley. "Let us take a look at the lay of the land. You, Sweetwater, have already been in the power of the ringleader of the band, and they have tried to put you out of the way. They did not succeed. Now they are determined to finish the work. They do not know, evidently, how much or how little evidence you have collected against them. More than that, knowing that we are your friends, our lives are in just the same danger as your own."

"But," Saul interrupted, "I am playin' off with 'em, an' passin' myself as a twin brother o' Sweetwater Saul's."

"It is clear that they do not take any stock in that."

"I don't see how they kin kelp it. They put me out o' th' way jest th' surest way they could, an' they won't think it possible that I could escape."

"There is something in that, but there is clearly a doubt in their minds, and they are going to give themselves the benefit of the doubt."

"That is th' size of it," agreed Riddles.

"And now, my friends," pursued Richley, "I have a little disclosure to make to you."

With this, he leaned forward and said something in a tone of voice scarcely above a whisper.

The eyes of the two old Graybeards flew wide open with surprise and astonishment.

"Is that ther gilt-edge truth?" Old Riddles questioned.

"It is nothing else," Richley assured, with a smile at their astonishment.

"Then we'll all be th' same sort o' animiles fer th' time bein'," declared Saul, "an' if we don't yank th' hides off'n 'em it will be 'cause wa kain't spell a-b-i-l, able. Ain't that so, Old Foolishness?"

"That is what it is," agreed Riddles; and he added: "But, you had better l'arn ter spell, I'm thinkin'. Who ever heard o' spellin' able with a 'i' in it? It should be a-b-e-l, able. Jest remember that, will ye? Yas, we're with him, sure."

"An' ye kin have th' sarvice o' my old mule, too, free-gratis fur nothin'," Saul further promised.

"An' th' same with my old dog," chimed in the old ranger. "That mule-critter o' yours ain't o' much 'count, but with old Napoleon in th' party we're bound ter make things hum an' git there with both feet."

"What!" cried Saul, up in arms at once, "do you dare ter say that mule ain't o' much 'count? I'd like ter know where we would 'a' been this mornin', only fer that same mule."

"Oh, you would been all right," returned Riddles, "fer me an' Nap was there."

"I mean if you hadn't been there."

"Then you would ha' been goners, I opine, fer no doubt we woke th' mule when we went out o' camp."

"No doubt; I'd like ter seen ye git out o' camp 'thout wakin' her."

"This is altogether away from the point," reminded Richley. "We have too big a question on hand now to stop to wrangle over your mule and dog. You remember I told you this evening that I might want to hire two just such men as you are. I want you now. Are you ready?"

"Haven't we just said so?" counterquestioned Riddles; "we're ready, even to th' critters."

"And ready to set out at once?"

"I reckon we be."

"That is what I want. We will steal out of this town along in the stilly hours after midnight, and then it will be a fight to the bitter end, and the party with the most brain and pluck will win the battle."

Thus it was arranged.

They did not retire to rest, but talked long and earnestly over their plans, and about two o'clock in the morning prepared to set out.

Sweetwater Saul had many useful things in his humble cabin, and these were packed to be taken along, or such of them as it was thought might prove useful, and at the hour named the three determined men made the start.

"Now," observed Sweetwater, when they had left the town behind them, "now fer th' sulphurous clime below; an' if we don't make it interestin' fer th' general in charge, you kin kick me."

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ORDERLY RETREAT.

"WELL," asked Stavendish Rudbure, "how did it work?"

The time was the evening of which we have been writing, and the place was the office of the Bank of England Mine.

The persons addressed were a little band of eight or ten men.

"It worked fine," answered one who seemed to be the spokesman of the party.

"Well, let's hear about it."

"There ain't much ter tell. We hurried right thar, an' got thar just in time to hinder them from findin' out anything from Jim. I guess Jim was goin' ter blow out, but we nipped it in th' bud. Ain't that so, fellers?"

"Ay, that it be," the others responded, in an accent broad and flat, showing that they were native born of old England.

"Then the fellow is dead?"

"Yes, dead as kin be. Couldn't be deader. They plugged him in two or three places. He'd orter known enough ter stood ahind some place o' shelter. They plugged it inter him hot an' heavy."

"Well, it is too bad; but, as you say, he ought to have taken better caution. Did you have any words with the men?"

"Yes, we had a little argymint with 'em. It didn't 'mount ter much, though, an' as soon as they see'd Jim was dead they went off."

"And where are they?"

"At th' cabin o' that old mountain tramp."

"Well, that is all now. It will have to rest for the present. Those of you who have been selected to work here to-night, remain; the rest may go."

So the brief interview ended.

Brief it had been, but pointed. By it the reader can understand that the suppositions of Paul Richley, as expressed to the old mountaineers, had not been far from the truth.

Some of the men left the office, and Stavendish and the others descended into the mine, where they were set to work.

After a time, when he had seen that everything was going right, and had had a conversation with the superintendent and the foreman in charge of the secret job, he and the superintendent came up to the office, where the elder Rudbure was awaiting them.

The hour was now late, and the superintendent did not tarry long, but left the father and son there together.

"Well," opened Rudbure senior, "now you have seen him, what do you think?"

"It must be his ghost," was the answer.

"That can hardly be, for he is real flesh and blood."

"Then I do not know what to think about it. If I were not positively sure that the man was—you know what, I would say it is he; but I do not see how it can be. There is no way in which I can explain it."

"And yet you have doubt enough in the matter to think that he ought to be—well, ought not to tell what he knows."

"Yes, that is true. There is one chance in ten thousand, I suppose, though I do not know where that chance can come in, that he is the same one; and that being the case, I think he had better be—be 'requested' to keep still."

"And our first 'request' has met with failure."

"That is so, but the next will not. Within twenty-four hours they will have 'consented' to be still, or I miss my guess."

"But, our hand must not appear in it."

"Of course not."

"How is it to be done?"

"Leave that to me."

"I shall have to. But, since other plans seem to have been powerless, I do not see what new ones you can think of. No matter, it all rests with you. How is that other scheme coming on?"

"Finely. To-night's work will put us through the wall."

"Good! I have been uneasy about that. When *that* is taken care of, and these men have been 'induced' to hold their tongues, *then* I shall breathe freely. After all the trouble we have put ourselves to, it will not pay to let trifles stand in our way."

"You are right. There is one other important item that you seem to have missed in your summing up."

"What is that?"

"It is that tramp showman."

"Ha! sure enough. I had it in mind to speak about him, but it slipped me. I would like to know what his game was."

"So would I, and what he knows, too. I shall not stop to inquire, however, for I have added him to my list."

"That will be a good stroke, too. I guess you are competent to take care of the matter."

"I imagine that I am. There is one thing that I am afraid of."

"And what is it?"

"I am afraid that showman said enough to make people curious."

"Well, we can afford to let them be so. They are curious already, for that matter, regarding the watchmen we have posted in the hills."

"That is where the danger lies. They may take it into their heads to invade that circle in force."

The elder Rudbure was thoughtful.

"Do you think we had better be getting out of here?" he inquired.

"Not by a good deal!" his son exclaimed.

"We came here with the intention of staying, and stay we will. If there is any need of it, and we can tell, we will double that guard, and station a little army within the circle. That secret shall not be wrested from us."

"I hope it will not come to that."

They talked on for half an hour longer, and then, the hour being late, left the office and went home.

Their fears were not without foundation. There were three determined men who were resolved to know what was going on.

Next morning Rudbure—the town—awoke as bright and cheerful as though the night had seen no disturbance, not to mention bloodshed.

The citizens of the town were early risers, and about as soon as it was light the streets began to be thronged.

And, naturally, the subject of conversation, wherever two or three came together to talk, was the excitement of the night. It was discussed from every point of view.

Later in the day there were two funerals. One was that of the miner who had lost his life in the saloon, and the other was that of the Indians, and the rascal whom Old Riddles and his two companions had killed.

The latter was buried by Lord Rudbure, and the Indians, too, as they were all his employees. The other was buried by friends.

In the Wild West there is little ceremony over such matters. They do not keep a body "on the shelf" two or three days, as the citizens of Rudbure would express it, but put it under ground at once. They hold that a dead man is of no use to the community, and consider that the sooner he is put out of the way the better.

But, what of Chipper A. Quick, the showman, and his trained "critters"? He had mysteriously disappeared. No one had seen anything of him since the night before.

After the trouble at the Bison's Head was over, he had gathered up his possessions, secured his share of the receipts of the evening, and went out and was seen no more.

It was supposed that he had gone to the hotel, where he had secured lodgings. That, however, he did not do; and it was clear that he had made his way out of town immediately, though no one could be found who had seen him go.

There was an air of mystery about it. Many of the citizens would have paid another admission fee for the sake of seeing the same performance over again, and were anxious to learn where he had gone.

The day passed, and nothing was ascertained concerning him, so it had to be set down as one of those occasional puzzles that baffle human understanding.

Nor was that all. There was another feature in the case. The two old mountain veterans, too, had disappeared during the night, and their friend, the stranger, with them. No one had seen them go, either.

Some of the "boys" went up to Sweetwater Saul's cabin during the day, and there they found a notice posted on the door.

It read as follows:

"To Sweetwater Saul:—When yue cum bak yue wil no by this notis that yuer bruther Noar has bin tue se yue an dint fine yue to hom. Mi frend ol Riddles is with me an we hav gon South so yue wil no what way tue cum if yue want tue se us. No more now yuer twin bruther Noar."

The object of such a notice the reader can easily guess. It was to confirm all the more strongly the story the old mountaineer had told about himself. And it was not a bad idea. Any one who was acquainted with Sweetwater's writing and spelling, however, would have had suspicions that the "twins" were too nearly alike to be genuine.

The Rudbures had something more to think about now. Why had all these men got out of town so suddenly and quietly? Had they become alarmed, and sought safety in flight? It would look that way.

It was a point on which they were anxious, but on which they based strong hopes. If that were the true solution, then they were safe again for a time.

Whatever their secret was, by the way, they were guarding it with the greatest care and caution. In truth, they were *too* careful. But that is always the case. A rascally game is usually discovered through the very means employed to keep it from being discovered.

On the next day news reached the town that the showman had made his appearance in another town, twenty-five miles away, and had held a performance there. Would not that explain his sudden departure from Rudbure? He had that distance to travel, and the sooner he was on the road the better. It looked reasonable.

And, too, word was brought from another source that the two old mountain graybeards had been seen many miles away to the south, and that they were plodding steadily forward

in that direction. Their friend was not with them, however.

The Rudbures breathed easier. It seemed clear that they had the field all to themselves again.

Now that the little ripple of excitement had passed, they could look the situation in the face with more calmness, and they perhaps wondered what it had all been about, anyhow.

Everything quieted down, and the town went right along in its usual way, as though nothing had happened to disturb its peace. There were some, of course, who, out of curiosity, ventured out into the Hills to see for themselves that the report of the line of guardsmen being stationed there was true, but none of them attempted to break through, or in any way cause trouble.

The employees, friends and followers of Lord Rudbure were in the great majority in the town, and they accepted his explanation of the matter, considered it none of their business anyhow, and so let it drop.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FLOODED MINE.

THE morning of the fourth day.

Great excitement prevailing. The town has something to talk about now, and everybody talks.

The report has gone forth that the southern lead of the Morning Star Mine was flooded with water during the night, and that the men cannot get in to their work. And the report is confirmed by Richard Checkering.

At the usual hour Harvey Blanchard, the superintendent, had gone down with the men, but their way was cut off by the water, and they had come out. Nothing could be done in that lead unless the water could be got out.

The tunnel of the southern lead of the Morning Star sloped downward at a fall of about ten feet to the hundred, and the end of this tunnel was completely full.

Putting the men to work in the other lead, the superintendent came out and reported the matter to Checkering.

It was a story that at first could hardly be credited.

"How do you account for it," Checkering asked.

"I don't account for it at all," the young man answered. "I cannot understand it. There has been no indication of water in there, and last night the floor and walls were perfectly dry."

"It is mighty strange. I wonder whether the Bank of England is in the same fix. They are working on the same lead, toward us, you know."

"It will pay us to find out."

This was the first cause of excitement, when it came to be known, and that was soon; and a little later on the same report went forth from the Bank of England.

That mine was said to be flooded, too.

In the mean time, Checkering and his superintendent had gone over to see the Rudbures.

They found Lord Rudbure, Stavendish and their superintendent all together in the office, and they seemed to have some important question under consideration.

"Hello!" exclaimed Rudbure senior, "this is a surprise. What brings you here? Is it possible that you are in the same dilemma that we are in?"

"If by that you mean that you are drowned out," returned Checkering, "we are in the same boat. Our southern lead is full of water."

"And you have come to see if it is the same with us, eh? Well, it is, as I have already said."

"Where do you suppose it comes from?" Checkering questioned.

"Just what we would like to know," was the answer.

"There have been no signs of water," declared Stavendish, "and it is a mystery. What can we do about it?" addressing Blanchard.

"We can do nothing until we learn where the water comes from," was the reply. "Is your shaft completely full?"

"No, but it is rising all the time," was the barefaced lie.

"Then I would suggest that we all go down there before it gets any higher, and see if we cannot solve the riddle."

"That is what we have done," said the elder Rudbure, "but we could learn nothing."

"But, you will permit us to go down and take a look around, will you not?" questioned Checkering.

"What is the use?" observed Gwinnett. "If I could not discover anything, I do not think you could. I am no child at this business."

"Still, it would be satisfying to see for ourselves," argued Checkering.

"I think the same as our superintendent," said Rudbure; "if we could not discover anything, you need not try to. I will not let you go down."

Checkering flushed with anger.

"It is a simple request, and one that I would not deny you under like circumstances," he flashed.

"I am not sure of that," was the retort. "You would not do me the favor to sell out to

me when I offered you more than your mine is worth."

"That is a different thing. I am not here asking you to sell out to me. What I have requested is reasonable, and by all going down together, before the water is too deep, we might learn something. But, no matter."

"We have done all that can be done," declared Stavendish, "and I consider that it would be perfectly useless to go down again. Still, father, he added, turning to Rudbury senior, "it would do no harm to let them go down and satisfy themselves."

The reader can see through this without the aid of glasses. The young man had a double role to play, and could not afford to appear too strong against Checkering.

"I don't care," the master of the situation retorted; "they can't go down. I can be as stubborn as he could. We will attend to our mine, and you attend to yours, Mr. Checkering."

"Thank you for your permission! I have been doing that, and shall continue to do so," and Checkering turned and left the office, his superintendent following him.

Neither side had won much of an advantage in the interview, though the Englishman had the better of the situation.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Lord Rudbury laughed, when they had gone; "that did me good. You did a good stroke, boys, when you thought of that drowning-out game. It has worked like a charm. They are in a bad fix, and we are safe. They can't get down into that part of their mine, and they can't get the water out. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It has certainly worked well," agreed Stavendish, "and now our position seems to be secure. Perhaps in a little while, now, Checkering will be willing to sell out at a reasonable figure."

So their talk ran, as they chuckled and congratulated themselves upon their success in their daring game.

In the mean time Checkering and Blanchard had gone back to their office.

"So you think everything is not straight, do you?" the mine-owner interrogated, as they entered and sat down, continuing their conversation.

"That is what I think, sir," the young man affirmed.

"And what do you think is wrong?"

"I think there is a game afoot to beat you out of your property."

"Ah! do you think that, too? Then there is something in it. That is my own thought about the matter. I believe there is a nig in the fence somewhere."

"And we must have him out."

"Go ahead and give me your reasons for thinking as you do."

"Well, in the first place, you refused their liberal offers for the mine. It was clear then that they wanted it badly. If they wanted it then they want it now. It has been a thorn in their side ever since they came here to think that they cannot get you out. They own everything here but your property. That is right in the heart of theirs. They have reasons for wanting it. Seeing that they could not buy you out, they are trying other means."

"You mean to say that they are the cause of the water being in the mine?"

"That is a mere conjecture. I know that there was no water near the place where we were working, that the rock there was dry; and now to-day we find the place flooded. It is very strange to say the least."

"You are right; but, where could they get the water, and how get it in there all in one night?"

"There, I confess, you have me. I do not know. There is one thing that I would call your mind, to, however."

"And what is that?"

"It is that showman who was here the other night."

"What of him?"

"Do you not remember how he spoke of the place, about there being a mystery here? It is likely that he knew what he was talking about."

"You are right, you are right. But, how are we to find out anything about it? Let's see, what was it he said? can you tell?"

"Why, he made it seem as though the pig was talking, you know, and told the people that, within that guarded circle back here in the Hills, are secrets that are very closely guarded; and he further declared that within that circle is the entrance to the dismal pit, or words to that effect. In our midst, he went on, are devils, and the domain of the Old Boy is beneath us."

"Yes, yes, that was about it."

"And don't you suppose that he hit the Rudburs pretty hard? for it was just at that time that the trouble commenced."

"Very likely. But, there is another point."

"What is it?"

"Can the young man Rudbury be mixed up in it? He has every reason to keep on the right side of me, if he can, I should think."

The young man flushed.

"Of that I do not want to speak," he said.

"What I might say might be misunderstood, though I do not say it would."

"I understand you," assured Checkering, "and know what you mean. Also understand me. That young man wants to marry my daughter, and while that matter is undecided, does it not look reasonable that he would want to court my favor?"

"It would seem so."

"And at the same time, if he has got any brain in his head he ought to know that he has a hopeless case on his hands. My daughter will never marry him. That is as sure as the world moves."

"He may look at it in that light, then, and is against you."

"He wanted the old man to let us go down into the mine."

"Yes, that is true. I do not know how to look at it. But that does not alter the fact of the case—which is, that there is water in our south lead."

"Exactly. And how are we to get it out?"

"We must first learn how it came there."

"And how are we to do that?"

"Will you leave that to me to find out?"

"Do you think you can do it?"

"I can try, at least. Just say that you will put it all into my hands, and I will see what I can do."

"All right, you may try it. Something has got to be done, and if you have an idea you are welcome to try it. And, if I can, I will help you."

"If you can, that is—if I need help, you shall have the chance to try."

"What is your plan?"

"I will go down into the Bank of England and learn what their secrets are, and if they are the cause of the water being in our mine I will soon learn how they put it there."

"Great Scott! that will be at the risk of your life."

"I suppose it will, but it will not be the first time that my life has been in danger, and it is not worth much anyhow."

"That is where you are wrong," Checkering exclaimed. "Unless I am deaf, dumb, blind and foolish, there is one who is interested in your life, young man, and that is my daughter. There, no need to say more; I know all about it. It is all right."

CHAPTER XXVII.

OTHER PLOTS AND PLANS.

No need to record all that was said on the subject with which the preceding chapter closes, for more was said, and a great deal more, too.

The substance of it was that Harvey Blanchard made known his love for Ermina Checkering, and the father gave his consent.

That forever settled the hopes of Stavendish Rudbury, if he still entertained any. Checkering had known the state of feeling between his daughter and Blanchard for some time, and, liking the young man, favored the suit.

If possible, Blanchard now took hold of the plan he had formed with more determination than ever. It was arranged that the Morning Star should run right along as usual, working in the other lead, which was out of reach of the water, and that all the men should be employed.

Blanchard would disappear for a time, and no one need know where he was. In fact it was not likely that any one outside of his own immediate friends would inquire.

The plan was set accordingly, and the superintendent of the Morning Star undertook his dangerous mission.

What his plan was, and how he intended to carry it out, will be told in another chapter. Another matter of moment now comes to hand.

The reader must be introduced to the parlor of the Rudbury mansion. There are two persons present. These are Victoria Rudbury and her brother Stavendish.

"It is no use your mentioning his name to me," Victoria was saying, "for I will not entertain the proposition for a moment."

"You may go further and fare worse."

"I am willing to take the chances."

"I know what is the matter with you," Stavendish snapped.

"Well, what is it?" curiously.

"You have allowed that upstart, Blanchard, to fill your eye to the exclusion of everybody else."

The young woman flushed.

"I am mistress of my own actions," she retorted, "and responsible to no one."

"But, girl, think of the name! This Blanchard is a nobody, while Gwinette is from an honored English family. Father wants you to marry him, and so do I."

"I do not care what you want," Victoria ignored. "You have no right to have anything to say about it."

"I know that I have not, but I should think that you would respect father's wishes in the matter."

"I am the one to be suited, not you or father. And, as for Blanchard's being nameless, as you say, it is not so. I have taken interest enough to learn something about him, and his family is even better than that of Gwinnett."

"How did you learn that?"

"No matter; it is as I tell you. And when you speak of nameless ones, where is that soft little fool of Checkering's that you seem to be set upon winning?"

"It is a little different in my case," Stavendish evaded.

"No, it is not," his sister denied. "But," she went on, "I guess there is little danger of your doing anything to disgrace the family name in that direction."

"Thank you," returned Stavendish, with a bow, "and that reminds me that you are in the same situation. It appears that Ermina Checkering and Harvey Blanchard are remarkably fond of each other, if what we can hear and see is to be believed, and I am of the opinion that neither of us will be able to part them."

"Stavendish, sit down, I want to talk with you."

This was said in an altogether different tone. It was a tone of compromise, if that by any means describes it.

Stavendish dropped upon the chair she indicated, and she went on:

"Can we not help each other in this matter?"

"Go ahead and tell me just what you mean," her brother invited, and he leaned back in his chair and awaited to hear what she had to say.

"Well," the young woman complied, "pay attention and I will do so. Can we not make up a plot of some sort to set them against each other, and then you and I step in and win them? You see I do not deny that you have guessed my secret. It is no use for me to deny that I love Blanchard, for I do, and I am determined to lead him to marry me if it can be done. There is nothing hidden between us. We understand each other well. Now, can we not do something of that kind?"

"That sounds all right," Stavendish reflected, "but the question naturally pops up: What are we going to do? I confess that I do not know. If it was only one-sided, I would say banish the other one from her presence in some way or other, and lead her to suspect that he is dead; but that cannot be done in this case."

"I see you have only one side of the case in mind, and that is your own side. No, I should say that it cannot be done. If anything happens to Harvey Blanchard, you may depend on it that you will hear from me. Do not forget that."

"That is just where the sticker comes. There is no neutral field in the game for us. We must work together or fight."

"And it will not pay us to fight."

"No."

"Then we must do the other thing, and that is help each other. Now, you tell me how we can do that."

Both were silent for some time, and Victoria was the first to speak.

"There is only one weapon that I can think of that we can use," she slowly observed, as the thought came to her mind.

"And what weapon is that?" her brother quietly asked.

"Jealousy."

"Ha! that is a good weapon, and no mistake about it; but, how can it be applied?"

"That is what I am trying to think of."

Another spell of silence.

Presently Victoria smiled, and it was a smile that told its own story. She had an idea in mind that she thought ought to work, and work well.

"What have you thought of?" Stavendish eagerly asked.

"Listen to this little play and tell me what you think of it: I will get a pretty love-letter, address it to Blanchard, and intrust it to your care. You will take good care that it does not fall into his hands, and equally as good care that it does fall into the hands of Ermina. It can be sealed, then torn open, and mused and soiled a little, to give it the appearance of having been carried in the pocket a day or two. Do you follow me?"

"Yes; go on."

"You can then write an anonymous note to her, inclose it with the letter, and send it to her, telling her the letter was found, and warning her to distrust Harvey, as he is false, and so forth."

"Well, and what then?"

"In the letter I write, I will appoint a meeting-place with him, and a time. I will lead her to think that it will not be the first meeting we have had, and that we are both desperately in love. Then in your note you can put her up to watch him and me."

"That is all very well, as far as it goes, but I do not see how you will bring Blanchard into it to do what you want."

"That is where the beauty of the little scheme will come in. Oh, I believe I could concoct a plot for a novel. At the last moment I will send a note to Blanchard, asking him to come immediately to a certain place, the place named in the first letter, of course, and I will think of something strong enough to draw him there, be sure of that. Then when he comes, I will take care that the right impression is made upon the mind of the watcher."

Stavendish looked thoughtful.

"I know what you are thinking about now," his sister ventured.

"What do you think?"

"You were reflecting that the same rule might be made to work both ways. If one could be led into such a scheme, why not the other? Just the same plan could be used to poison the mind of Blanchard against the girl."

"That is all true enough, but that is not what I was thinking about."

"Then what was it?"

"I was thinking that nice as your little game is made up, it might not work."

"And pray why not?"

"Ermina is too trustful, I fear, to believe any such story."

"Goodness! how can she help believing, when she will have a letter put right into her hands that will prove it?"

"And, anyhow, she is far too honorable to play the spy. She would be more likely to go direct to Blanchard and face him with the matter. Or, she might pay no attention to it whatever."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Victoria laughed merrily, "how blind you men are when in love. You think she is an angel. I know the sex too well to think that she would do anything else than the thing suggested. The jealous streak in her nature will turn a beautiful green when she gets hold of that letter, and she will let nothing short of death cheat her out of being present at the meeting."

"You must not judge everybody by yourself," her brother cautioned.

The girl's eyes flashed.

"I am not taking pattern by myself," she declared, warmly, "but judging of what I know of the best of us. It is nature, and it can't be overcome. Why, that little fool will fall into the trap, and have her mind poisoned, as easily as turning your hand."

"And how about the other fool?" Stavendish observed, sarcastically—"how about him?"

"The programme can be slightly changed to fit his case all the better."

"I hope it will all come out as you feel so confident it will, but I have my doubts about it. Nevertheless, we will try it. There is one other point. When you meet Blanchard at that appointed place, what are you going to say to him? I can tell you that you have a delicate part to play, if you expect finally to lead him to make love to you and marry you."

"I will think over that, and you may be assured that my ready wit will suggest something."

"I hope it will, and that it will work to suit us both, but—"

He was interrupted by a servant, who at that moment knocked and entered the room.

"Well?" the mistress of the house interrogated.

"Mrs. Checkering to see you," the servant explained.

"Show her right in," was the direction, and in a moment that lady entered the room.

Sue greeted the brother and sister warmly, and after some minutes Stavendish made his excuse and retired.

"My dear Victoria," the woman exploded, the moment they were alone together, "you cannot guess what has taken place."

"I certainly can not," Victoria confessed, her eyes open wide with wonderment, "what is it?"

"Why, nothing less than this: my dutiful daughter and Harvey Blanchard are engaged."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DETERMINED ADVANCE.

"HA, ha, ha! Napoleon, ye old howler! That was another good one, it was; another mighty good one."

Old Riddles, his dog and the book of riddles.

They were alone together, in a wild and lonely part of the Rockies, south of Rudbury some miles, and were resting.

It was about the middle of the day, and they had had a long tramp and were tired. And as they rested the old ranger brought out his little volume and proceeded to regale himself and the dog with some riddles.

The old man was seated on a rock, his rifle resting between his knees, his book in hand, and the dog was frisking around at his feet.

"That was a good one, old howler," the ranger further averred. "It was and no mistake, by hokey. And now here's another. 'Why are bakers very self-denying persons?' There, now I've got ye, ye homely old critter, ye, sure."

The dog was silent, awaiting the outburst of laughter on the part of its master.

"Give it up, do ye?" after a moment's pause; "well, I thought ye would. It is easy enough, howsumdover, when ye know what th' answer is. An' here it is: Th' reason why bakers are very self-denying persons is, because they make a practice of selling what they knead themselves. Ho, ho, ho! That ain't by any means slow, nuther, it ain't, by hokey. An' here is another fer ye ter tackle: 'Why should a person never sleep in a railroad car?' Now, that is one that will cause yer ter do some tall thinkin', an' yet it is jest as easy as kin be. Come, now, why is it?"

The faithful old dog made no attempt to reply, and after waiting a moment as though he had really expected it to do so, the old ranger gave the answer.

"I'll tell ye, Nap, old feller, what th' answer is. The reason why a person should never sleep in a railroad car is, because the train always runs over sleepers. Ha, ha, ha! ye didn't think o' that, now did ye?"

With this the old man slapped his leg, threw back his head and laughed heartily, and the dog, joining into the spirit of the fun, frisked around him in its liveliest manner.

"Oh, I knowed they would do ye good, old howler, I knowed they would, fer it is a fack that nothin' will cheer you an' me up so quick as a good dose o' riddles will. Now here is another fer ye ter try yer luck at: 'When does a cow become real estate?' Oh! I have got ye this time, sure pop."

Again he waited as though for the dog to answer, as it seemed, and at the same time he glanced around as if looking for some one, keeping his eyes part of the time fixed upon a trail that led away to the right, and along which he could see for some distance.

"Wal, d'ye give it up?" he demanded, as he turned his attention back to the dog. "Ye do, eh? Why, you ain't half guessin' 'em ter-day; what is th' matter with ye? Don't they bit ye right? Pay 'tention, now, an' I'll tell ye what th' book says about that one; an' ye know we can't go back on what th' book says. Here is th' answer ter it: The time when a cow becomes real estate is, when she is turned into a field. Oh, I knowed I had ye that time, old howler, I did, by hokey. Now here is— But, thar they come, an' we'll have ter cut short fer this time. Come on."

Saying this, he quickly put away his book, and taking up his rifle, started forward to meet those who were approaching.

These were persons who need no introduction.

They were Sweetwater Saul and Paul Richley, with Sweetwater's mule, Polly Ann, in the lead.

The mule carried a pack that evidently consisted of provisions, arms, ammunition, etc.

"Hello! here ye come, do ye?" the Rocky ranger exclaimed in a jovial tone, as he met them.

"Yas, Old Good-fer-nothin'," responded Sweetwater, "heur we come, an' we hope we see ye."

"I hope ye do, Old Quarrelsome!" returned Riddles, and then the quaint old pair came together and shook hands warmly.

"Have you been here long, old friend?" inquired Richley, as he too came in for a shake.

"No, not longer'n a little while or so," the old ranger answered vaguely; "at any rate, about that time, I should say. Well, how is it?"

"It is all right," answered Richley, "and now we are ready for the work. You are to take charge of the guide part of the business, and your opinion is to be taken in all things. Your pard here will be second in command, and I will be nothing until the time comes for me to act."

"That is th' way it orter be," agreed Sweetwater, promptly, "but at th' same time I can't agree that it is th' right thing ter have that dog set ahead o' my mule. I want th' mule considered ahead o' th' dog."

"Not by a good deal," cried Riddles. "If it comes ter that, Saul kin take my place, an' I'll be second in command. That dog—"

"Now see here," interrupted Richley, "let me settle this thing. You are both in my employ, and you both agreed that I should have the use of the animals, too. Am I not right?"

"That is kerreck," they both assented.

"Well, then, you are satisfied to let me settle the matter?"

"Yes, but—"

"Yes, only I don't—"

"There, now, no buts and don'ts about it; I will tell you what I think will be perfectly fair."

"Wal, what is it?" from both of them.

"It is this: Now that I have chosen you, Old Riddles, to act as commander-in-chief, your dog goes with you, as a matter of course; and as you, Sweetwater Saul, are given the post of second in command, your mule goes with you; but in the fact that Riddles's place is one degree higher than yours, I will put the dog just one degree lower than the mule, and so make it about even all around. Isn't that fair? So, Riddles, you can look upon your dog as being aide-de-camp to one who is just one degree higher in rank than the owner of the mule; and you, Saul, can look upon the dog as being just one degree lower in rank than your mule. Now, if that isn't clear and fair, then I do not know how to make it so."

The two old graybeards looked at each other in silence. They were mystified, and could not see the matter in all its boasted clearness.

"Can't find any fault with that, can you?" Richley further questioned; "it is as plain as the nose on your face. The dog ranks higher than the mule, *de facto*; but the mule holds first place *de jure*. Can't you see?"

"If you say that it is all right," observed

Sweetwater, slowly, "I s'pose it is, an' I am willin' ter have it so."

"I assure you it couldn't be fairer."

"Wal, I won't kick," agreed Riddles, "an' so it is. Nap," turning to the dog, "bear in mind that *de facto* th' case is you are ranked first; an' anyhow you belong to me, your master."

"An' you, mule," Sweetwater promptly followed, "you remember that you ain't any behind that bow-legged cur, but really one degree higher."

"There, now, let it drop right there, my good friends, and not another word about it," interposed Richley. "The whole thing is settled, and that is all there is to it. It need not be brought up any more. Now if you are willing, friends, we will have a little something to eat and then be on our way. This night the start is to be made, you know."

The matter was dropped, instantly, and the two old rangers were as friendly as ever, and both set about the business of getting something ready to fortify the inner man.

When that was done, and they had eat all they cared for, the mule was packed up again, and they went on in company.

They headed toward the north, toward Rudbury, and the course was about the same as the one Old Riddles had come over some days previously.

They were heading straight to the forbidden territory, where they were sure to be stopped and refused leave to proceed further.

What was their plan? It was plain that they had some plan, or it would have been a waste of time for them to have come up that way.

A plan they had. Several days had now elapsed since their departure from Rudbury, and they had not been idly spent. What their plan was will be revealed as we progress. Suffice it to say that it was a good one. But, the best of plans are often upset by unforeseen accidents or turns of events.

They talked as they plodded along, but not steadily. Some minutes would be spent in that way, now and again, and there would be longer spells of silence between.

"By the way, Sweetwater," said Richley, after one of these pauses, "you have not changed your mind in regard to that landmark you stored away in your memory, have you?"

"Not a bit," was the prompt answer, "an' I never shall. It is fotygraffed on my mind ter stay."

"The outlines of a rock, standing out against the sky, looking like a Jew's nose, eh?"

"Exactly; an' that is what I called it—th' Jew's Nose."

"An' that ye seen from th' narrer split in th' wall of th' cave where ye was kept priz'ner," further recalled Riddles.

"You have got it straight," Saul affirmed.

"But you had never seen that same place from the outside, that you can remember of?" remarked Richley.

"No," Sweetwater agreed, "but then there ain't nothin' remarkable in that, fer I never sot down an' looked at th' rocks fer so long at one time in my life. Ye see, I was shut right in there and had ter do that or nothin'."

"Exactly. And now that takes us right back to our starting-point. We must look for that Jew's Nose, and when we have found that, then it will be for you to discover the crevice in the rock that opens into the place where you were confined."

"That is th' programme, an' I hope that we kin carry it out."

"It is only a question of stick-to and patience," remarked Richley, "and I hope that we have plenty of that in us."

Again they lapsed into silence.

When that silence was broken again, it was Old Riddles that spoke.

"We kin fully depend on th' other party doin' their share," he observed to Richley, adding:

"That is, I s'pose we kin, can't we?"

"We can depend on them as on ourselves," was the bold assurance. "They will do their part."

"An' we will do ours," assured Sweetwater.

It was just growing dark when they reached the fork in the trail, the place where Old Riddles had once before turned to the right, and they now turned in the same direction. They were now on the trail to the region below.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LITTLE MORAL SUASION.

THE rope was around the man's neck, and he was stretched up so tightly that his toes barely touched the ground.

Around him were four men, all wearing heavy black masks, so that no part of their faces could be seen.

They were a determined looking party, and the man they had in their power was clearly in a bad fix.

Who was he? Who were they?

Let us come upon them, and learn what they are doing.

"If you mean to tell me what I want to know," said he of the masked ones, who seemed to be their leader, "do not delay about it. Delays are dangerous, and your time is short. If

you mean to save your life, make the signal agreed upon."

The victim maintained stolid silence, and did not move.

There was a gag in his mouth, so that would account for his silence, but it was evident that some signal had been given wherewith he was to let them know that he would talk, if he yielded.

They had no light, except that afforded by the stars, but as the men stood close around their victim, that was sufficient.

"Nothing to say yet, eh?" the leader observed. "Well, men," adding, "draw up a little more on the rope."

The order was obeyed, and the fellow was swung just clear.

"How do you like it?" the leader asked. "Do you want your wind cut off in dead earnest?"

Still the man in the bad fix made no motion or sound.

This silence continued for the space of perhaps five seconds, when the leader of the party ordered:

"Well, yank him up, and no more fooling with him. If he is fool enough to throw his life away, it is not our fault. Up with him!"

The order would have been obeyed promptly enough evidently, but, just then, the man on the rope began to signal frantically with his hands, which were tied in front of him.

He had held out as long as possible, but now the strain upon his neck and want of breath brought him to terms.

"Hold!" the leader cried, the moment he saw this; "he signals that he will tell us what we want to know. Let him down."

Instantly the man was dropped to his feet.

The masked leader stepped up to him, revolver in hand, and loosening the rope around his neck, said:

"That is where you show your good sense, my fine fellow. You are not in Old England now, and your life isn't worth a cent here unless you come to time when you are told. Now I will loosen this gag in your mouth, and then you tell me what I want to know. If you don't, up you will go again, and this time to stay, too."

"An' take care that you don't holler," another cautioned.

"He has already been warned about that," observed the leader. "If he does, this revolver is likely to go off and make an extra hole in his head."

The gag was untied and allowed to drop from his mouth, and all waited for him to speak.

For some moments he had all he could attend to to get his breath back again, for he had been pretty badly choked, but presently he was all right in that respect, and then in a tone of the greatest alarm he asked:

"Would ye really 'ang me, boys?"

"Would we!" exclaimed the leader; "if you don't come to time immediately, you will know to your sorrow."

"Then Hi will tell ye the word ye want to know. Let me whisper it to ye, 'owever, for there is no need to tell more than one of ye, Hi suppose."

"All right. Whisper it to me, and see that you don't whisper it too loud. I will catch it."

With this the masked leader of the little band held his ear to the fellow's lips, and a word was whispered.

"Do you swear that that is the right word?" the masked man demanded.

"Hi swear hit is."

"Very well. I shall have to take your word for it, but if you have fooled me it will go hard with you, that I can tell you."

"Hob, hit's his hall right, that Hi hassure you."

"All right."

"Hand now you will let me go?"

"Not by a good deal!" the master of the situation exclaimed. "You must think that we are soft indeed. I will not suppose upon your having told me the wrong word, since you assure me that you have told me the right one, but I will not put the temptation in your way to go and give warning of what you have told. Oh, no!"

"Then you mean to 'ang me hany'ow?"

"Oh, no! We are not so untruthful as all that, my man. I told you that if you would give me that pass-word I would spare your life. That is all settled. I shall hold you prisoner, however, until I have proved the word you have given."

"You 'ad better be careful habout runnin' your neck hinto danger."

"That is all right; and now, men, bring him back to the shanty."

The masked men took their victim from under the tree, and led him away to a shanty from which they had brought him only a short time previously.

That shanty was within the grounds of the Morning Star Mine.

With this statement made, the reader can surmise what was going on. A few words in explanation may not be out of place, however.

The leader of the masked men was Harvey Blanchard, and the others were men in the employ of Checkering. Under the leadership of

Blanchard, they had laid a plot for the capture of one of Rudbury's men, and having captured him, had made him tell what he knew about the mine.

The fellow had stuck well to the story that the Bank of England Mine was flooded too, and could not be made to say otherwise, though Blanchard tried hard to lead him into some unintentional admission. But, he had let out that no one could get into that mine without a pass-word, a fact which Blanchard had learned already, and which was the principal thing he was after.

Of course the man had refused to tell what that pass-word was, but he was finally induced to do so, in the manner shown.

The shanty was near the entrance to the mine, and was for the use of the two men who acted as night watchmen. It was but a simple affair, but it was tight, and its doors and windows could be securely closed.

Into this shanty the men entered with their prisoner, and the door was shut after them. The windows had already been closed, so that no one could see in.

A light was burning dimly, and this was now turned up so that everything was plainly seen.

Their prisoner was a man not over thirty-five years of age, and it would have been noticed instantly that there was some resemblance between him and Blanchard. They were of about the same size, and their hair was of about the same color.

"Now, my man," Harvey said, "we will proceed to the next stage of the game. I want you to tell me everything you can about the mine, so that when I go down to-morrow in your place I shall be able to carry myself straight. I want to know what your work is, so that I can do just as you would do. Do you understand me?"

"Hi hunderstand ye," the Britisher answered, "but that will do ye no good. Ye couldn't go down there hand work han hour without bein' found hout."

"I am going to risk that," was the response to that. "You tell me everything you can, and I will take care of the rest."

The fellow did not seem to be inclined to do so. "It will be better for you to speak right out," Blanchard warned, "for I will stand no trifling with you. If necessary, we will build a fire and hold your feet to it until you will be glad enough to talk."

Such a threat as this had the effect to loosen the fellow's tongue, and for half an hour he talked along easily enough.

Whether he told the truth or not remained to be seen, but of course Blanchard had to accept it as the truth, there being nothing else that he could do with it.

When their talk ended, Harvey ordered the fellow to undress, an order which under threat of a leveled revolver, he obeyed.

That done, some other clothes were given him, and Blanchard rolled up the ones he had discarded, to take them with him.

"I shall have to make use of these things," he said, "but you shall have them, or others just as good, when I am done with them. I am sorry to put you to so much trouble, but it could not be helped, and I will conduct myself in a manner that will do you proud."

The poor fellow had to smile at the grim humor of this.

"Well," Harvey further said, addressing his men, "I now leave him in your hands for safe-keeping, and I want you to see to it that he does not get away from you."

"We will take care of that," they promised.

"I expect to be back in two days, but if I am not, and do not return at all, then you can let the fellow go in one week. Do you understand?"

They answered that they did, and so leaving them there with their man, Harvey left the shanty and went over and entered the office of the mine.

There he lost no time in changing his clothes, discarding his own, and putting on those the Englishman had so recently worn.

When that was done, he proceeded to perfect his disguise in other ways, and when he was all through he could not help reflecting, as he turned to a glass:

"Well, I hardly know whether I am myself or that other fellow. I guess I am all right, and to-morrow puts it to the test. I hope that I shall succeed, and that I will be able to unearth the whole thing, and lay the matter bare for inspection."

Just then a noise was heard at the door. It sounded as though some one was trying to turn the key in the lock.

"Who is there?" Harvey demanded.

"I," came the answer, in the voice of Checkering. "Who are you?"

Blanchard knew the voice at once, and quickly turned the key in the lock and threw open the door.

Checkering entered, but, the instant his eyes fell upon Harvey he sprang back and stared at him.

"Who are you?" he demanded, "and what are you doing here?"

"Hi ham Paul Bludstone, sir," Harvey an-

swered, with the best dialect and accent he could borrow.

"And what are you doing here?"

Blanchard had to laugh.

"Don't you know me, Mr. Checkering?" he pleasantly asked.

"Hang me if I did!" Checkering exclaimed. "Why, your disguise is perfect. But, do you think you can play the part?"

"The least I can do is to try," was the calm answer. "If it comes to the worst, a man can only die once, you know."

CHAPTER XXX.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

NEXT morning when the men of the Bank of England Mine appeared for work, Paul Bludstone was among their number. But, he seemed to be in a sullen mood, and had little to say. When spoken to he answered, but he sought conversation with no one.

"What is the matter with 'e this marnin', lad?" one ventured to ask, on the way to the entrance to the mine. "'Ang me, but 'e looks down i' the mouth."

"Hob, there's nothinkk serious the matter," Blanchard—for of course it was he—made answer, "nothinkk serious, mate; me 'ead feels big, that his hall. Hi don't feel bright has ha lark, you know."

"Hi think hit must be somethinkk hof that kind. But, cheer hup, lad, that will soon wear hof when 'e gets hat work."

"Hi suppose so."

Blanchard had studied Bludstone's accent and manner of speaking, on the previous night, and had now put his strength to the test in that respect.

He had escaped detection.

Of course he took care not to get in too strong a light, kept his hat well down, and it might have been noticed that his face and hands were not remarkable for their cleanliness.

When they came to the entrance to the mine, the men all formed in line, and then advanced and slowly entered, each one giving the pass-word as he went in.

Blanchard's position was about the middle of the line, and he had in one hand a trusty revolver, ready for instant action, in case the word he had did not carry him through.

It was a moment of great suspense.

His turn soon came, and with a tight grip on his revolver, and every nerve ready for action, he gave the word.

The moment it was spoken he passed on, as he had seen the others do, and he was not challenged.

It would not have surprised him if he had been, for the man had had it in his power to have told him a "whopping" lie, if he had felt inclined to do so.

As it turned out, Blanchard could well conclude that all the lying propensity had been thoroughly frightened out of him.

Once within the tunnel, the men made ready their lights, and then advanced.

The tunnel led away at a gentle slope for some distance, as perhaps has already been described, and then came an abrupt drop. Here means of ascent and descent were of course provided, and in companies of five the men were lowered to the bottom of the shaft.

Blanchard was in the second party, and when they reached the bottom they followed the lead of the first company, who were by this time some distance away along the tunnel.

"Hi wonder 'ow deep the water his hin the Marnin' Star this marnin'," observed one of his companions.

"'O, 'o, 'o!" laughed the others, "hit must be full by this time."

"That was a bloody good joke, 'pon me word hit was."

"Habout the richest Hi hever 'eard."

Blanchard's ears were ready for this sort of information, and he drank it in eagerly.

He had been wondering where the water could be, if it were true that this mine, too, was flooded.

The correctness of his suspicions was now proven.

Presently they came to a roomy place, like the one at the bottom of the shaft where they had come down, and Blanchard's eyes were well about him, taking in everything that came under his observation.

Here he noticed that there was a rift in the rocky wall on one side, and that through that rift a blow of cold air came upon his face as he passed. All beyond was inky blackness.

It was only a little way further to the mine proper.

This part of the place he had questioned the prisoner about very closely, and at first sight he saw that what the man had told him was substantially correct. It had the general appearance of other mines; but one thing that struck the eye of the Morning Star superintendent immediately was a small engine standing there, with hose attached, one end of which stretched away across the rocky floor, while the other was inserted in the wall high up on the north side.

In an instant he saw how the water had come into the mine. It had been pumped in by the

Rudburys. Where it came from could be ascertained by following the lead of the hose.

He stood around with the other men for some moments, waiting for the others to arrive before they set to their work, and he made the best use of his eyes that he could during that brief time.

On one side of this place where the work was going on, was what might be taken to be the entrance to a great cave. And, as he stood and looked about him, and felt now and then the cold air that came from that direction, he came to the belief that that was what it was.

What went to confirm this suspicion was the fact that it was into this dark hole that the hose disappeared, and at the entrance was stationed a guardsman.

Verily he was in a chamber of mysteries.

In a few minutes another party of five arrived, and one of these went forward to where the mentioned guardsman was standing and took his place.

This was the relief, and the man who had been there all night seemed glad enough to get away.

Blanchard did not let his curiosity get the better of his judgment, and only looked around him as the others were doing, and did not act as though this was his first visit there. He took care not to let his actions create suspicion.

The other men having arrived, all now set about their duties, and Blanchard went to work as though he were really the person he pretended to be, Paul Bludstone.

He followed the directions of his prisoner carefully. Having found that the man had told him the truth in regard to other things, he trusted him fully now, and acted upon whatever he had learned from him.

Going to the place where, as nearly as he could judge, was the place Bludstone held as his own field of labor, he picked up a big hammer and struck a blow upon a drill where it was standing in a hole.

No sooner had he done so than one of the other men cried out:

"Old hon, there, Bludstone, you be his my place."

"His that so, mate?" Blanchard asked, innocently.

"You know hit is so," was the retort. "Hit his some more hof your jokes, Hi supouse."

Blanchard dropped the hammer.

"Well, no 'arm done, mate, no 'arm done. By the way, 'ave ye got ha bit hof ha rag habout ye, till Hi tie hup my thumb? Hit his has sore has hit can be."

"No, Hi 'aven't, but Jem there 'as some, Hi guess."

Blanchard then called out to Jem, and learning who Jem was in this manner, put the same question to him.

Jem had what he wanted, and while the others were then getting their places, the spy busied himself in tying up the pretended sore thumb, thus gaining time.

When all the others had taken their places, then he took the only one that was unoccupied, and thus avoided further mistake.

It did not take him long to learn that the foreman of the men was a pretty severe sort of fellow, and that he had the men under him actually afraid of him. He was full of abuse, and more than once during the forenoon he kicked some of them to hurry them a little in their work.

Blanchard could not help wondering at the cowed spirits of the men who put up with this.

It was near noon when a little thing happened that came near spoiling all of the daring spy's chances for finding out what he wanted to know, and getting him into serious trouble.

Gwinnett had been down, and had gone out again. He had found some fault with the foreman. When he was gone, then the foremen had to vent his spite upon the men, and, as it happened, Blanchard was the first one he spoke to.

With a startling string of oaths he jumped to where he was, gave him a kick, and demanded to know what he was idling for.

On the spur of the moment Blanchard's hand was on its way to his hip, where he had a weapon, and his blood was boiling, but in time he checked himself. It was only by the greatest effort, however, that he could resist knocking the coward down.

The place where Blanchard was working was well into the passage that opened to the cave, and he watched that part of the mine as much as possible.

Stavendish Rudbury, Gwinnett, and several others had entered there during the forenoon, and as they went in they each gave a pass-word to the armed sentinel.

The spy resolved that he would visit that part of the mine before he went out, and would gain possession of the secret of the place, whatever it might be.

How to proceed, and how to carry out the plan when formed, were questions he had to hold in debate.

After due consideration, he concluded that it would be a better time to try to gain admission there at night, than it would be to undertake it at the noon hour.

This settled upon, he left the mine with the others when noon came.

His face was now dirtier than ever, and having on Bludstone's own clothes, his disguise was perfect.

He had taken care to question the man about everything, and so knew where to go for his dinner. Everything the fellow had told him having thus far proved true, he was prepared to put full confidence in him.

All passed off well, and beyond a good deal of joking that Bludstone did not act like himself, and so forth, nothing was said to him that could lead to the discovery of the imposture.

When they returned to the mine, he took his place and worked away with a will, saying little to others, and they saying little to him.

By this time he had learned the names of all of them, and a great many other things that he had not dreamed of before.

The afternoon passed, and the hours sped toward quitting-time. He had formed no real plan of action yet, but had had the matter under consideration all the while, and various plans had suggested themselves and been weighed.

Something would now have to take definite shape, or it would soon be too late.

He kept his thoughts busy, and after a time he dropped his tools and walked out of the mine proper into the tunnel. It was now about the hour of quitting, and as he passed out he held his thumb in his hand and muttered a string of nonsense about mashing it entirely.

All thought, naturally, that he had struck his thumb, and, disgusted, was going out of the mine. The foreman saw him, too, but said nothing.

But Blanchard did not go out of the mine. He hurried forward to the place where the great crevice in the rock was, and there he looked hastily around, put out his light, and clambered up the wall at a place where it would have been thought impossible for any one to have climbed, and there held on until the others had gone out.

CHAPTER XXXI.

INVADING THE CIRCLE.

"WHOOP! Stop right short, thar, pilgrims, an' elevate yer flaps. This weepin o' mine is jest dyin' ter puke lead at yer."

Old Riddles, Sweetwater Saul, and Paul Richley, all came to an abrupt stop and followed the directions given.

"Whoop it is," exclaimed Saul; "an' now, what is ther matter with Hanner?"

"That is what's th' matter," chimed in Riddles; "why for? Them's th' question afore th' house."

"Th' matter is, pilgrims," was the response, "that you will have ter turn tail to an' paddle out o' here an' go around. You can't cross here."

Old Riddles and his companions had proceeded but a short distance along the trail that led into the dismal canyon, when they were met with the challenge with which this chapter opens, and then followed the words we have recorded.

It was what they had expected, so they were not at all surprised.

If they were surprised at all, it was that they had come so far without being challenged.

The man who had stopped them stood up on the rocks above their heads, at the side of the trail, and he was a rough-looking fellow indeed.

He was thoroughly armed, and it was clear from his manner that he meant business.

"How do you know whar we want ter go?" the Rocky ranger demanded.

"I don't know an' I don't care," was the answer. "What I do know is that you can't go no furdur in this direction."

"An' what's th' reason we can't?" the ranger parleyed.

"Because I say so?" was the snapped answer to that.

"That is a 'tarnal poor reason," growled Sweetwater Saul. "That is no reason at all, that ain't. Why can't we go this way as well as any other? We want ter go ter Rudbury."

"I can't help where ye want ter go ter," declared the man on the rocks, "you can't pass here, an' that is flat; so th' best thing that you ken do is ter face right around an' meander out. You hear me."

"My friend," said Richley, who had been silent, "it is very exasperating to be turned around in this manner without knowing why it is done. If you would tell us the reason, that would make it a little better, I have no doubt."

"Tell ye nothin'; an' now, as I am tired o' chinnin' with ye, th' best thing ye kin do fer yer health is ter slope."

"Well," said Riddles, "if sich is th' case, feller-critters, I reckon we had better do th' quick-step act. Right about face!"

As he said this, the old fellow turned and retraced his steps, the others following.

"This is a sweet order o' things in a free kentry," complained Saul.

"This part o' th' kentry ain't free!" the man on the rocks called out after him, "an' th' sooner that is known all around, th' better."

"We may see you again!" Richley shouted back.

"It may not be well fer ye if ye do."

The three continued on the retreat until they had come up out of that trail, and had gone some distance to the south on the other, and then they came to a halt.

"Well, we found 'em ter home yet," observed Riddles.

"And wide-awake, too," added Richley. "Now, the next move in the game is to be played, and then we will try our luck again."

"An' then fer th' war ter begin," said Saul.

By this time it was dark, and the trail was not easy to see.

"Shall we start on," inquired Richley, "or remain right where we are?"

"We will go just a leetle furdur," answered Riddles, "ter a place where we kin see around more, an' there we will stop an' wait fer th' fun ter begin."

"Very well, just as you advise."

"That is it, an', Saul, you kin lead th' way, now, as you are more 'quainted right around here nor what I be, an' especially in th' dark."

"Ye might let that cute dog o' yourn do it," Saul provokingly returned.

"He ain't got no time," was the retort; "it takes all o' his time ter watch that ornery mule o' yourn."

"Watch a bone, ye mean."

"That was what I was goin' ter say, but I thought ye might not like it."

"At it again, are you?" said Richley. "I think you had better let such matters rest for the time being."

"Jest as you think best," observed Riddles; "it wasn't me; it was him an' his old mule."

"No it wasn't, nuther; it was him an' that ornery cur."

"There, there, let it drop, and lead on, one or the other of you, so that we can come to that place."

Both old codgers laughed.

"We can't help havin' a leetle fun by th' way, mister," said Riddles. "Come, Old Foolishness," to Saul, "lead th' way to a spot where we git a wider circuit o' outlook."

Saul took the mule and led the way, and in a little time they came out upon a broad plateau where, had it been daylight, they could have had quite an extended view.

Here they stopped, and waited as though in expectancy of some coming event of which they had had previous knowledge.

They had not a great while to wait, and an event, of which they had indeed had previous knowledge, came to pass with a suddenness that startled even them.

There was a bright flash, and half a dozen rockets shot skyward, leaving a long trail of fire behind them, and when they exploded the whole rugged scene was illuminated with a ghostly light.

There was a moment's pause.

As suddenly, then, came the same flash of light in another direction, and up went another batch of rockets, with the same result.

"Very good!" observed Richley, calmly, "very good!"

"Wal, I should say that it was," exclaimed Sweetwater. "I thought they was goin' ter bring th' hull sky right down with 'em."

"That was only a leetle sight," commented Old Riddles. "You orter see'd 'em like I see'd 'em one Fourth o' July out East thar whar I was—um!"

"Bigger'n these?"

"Mebby they wasn't bigger, but there was a thousand times a sight more of 'em. It war amazin' ter see."

While the two graybeards talked, their companion was busily engaged in taking something from a package that was attached to the pack on the back of the mule.

Presently he had found what he wanted, and lighting a match, set fire to it.

There was a sputter of fire for a moment, and then with a loud hiss a single rocket shot upward into the evening sky.

"Peter th' Harmit!" exclaimed Old Riddles, "I didn't know that you was loaded that way, too."

"Most enough ter frighten a feller outen his skin," ejaculated Sweetwater. "What does that mean?"

"That is an answer signal, to show them that we are on the ground and ready for business," Richley explained.

"Then ther fun is about ter begin?"

"I should smile and say—the show is open!"

All stood still there in the darkness on the plateau, waiting and watching.

Presently the sound of firearms reached their ears, borne from two directions, making quite a lively rattle on the still night air.

"That sounds like old Injun times," commented Sweetwater, as it brought back the memory of other days.

The firing was kept up. Now and then a rattling volley would be heard, and then for a time only a single shot would be heard at intervals of a few seconds.

When this had been going on for about ten minutes, Richley spoke:

"Now we will make our start. Lead the way,

Riddles, and we will go right back to the place where we were balked the other time."

"Jest ez you say," assented the veteran, and throwing his rifle over his shoulder and, speaking to his dog, he started.

Sweetwater and the mule were right after him, and Richley brought up the rear.

They retraced their steps, were soon upon the trail, and in due time were at the fork where they had before turned off.

They turned off now, came to the place where they had been challenged, and continued safely on.

The sentinel was not there!

Making as little noise as possible, they pushed right along, and soon were winding their way down into the dark and dismal canyon.

Half an hour later they came to a halt. Here was the place where the startling notice was painted on the rock. It could not now be seen, however.

"Which way?" the old ranger asked.

"Into that tunnel you spoke about," Richley directed.

"Come right along, then," and, turning to the right on he went.

This branch of the canyon was so completely dark that its blackness could be almost felt, and it grew lower and lower as they advanced.

When they had gone about half a mile, as it seemed, Richley called a halt and asked:

"Are we near any suitable place to camp?"

"Jest as good right here as anywhere," answered Riddles.

"Then let us camp. No need to go further."

"Camp it is," exclaimed Sweetwater, "an' nobody more willin' nor what I be."

"We are now inside of the circle," commented Richley, "thanks to our ruse, and here we will stay until we learn the mystery or lose our lives."

The mule was unpacked, a frugal meal was partaken of, and they then prepared to make themselves comfortable for the night; Old Riddles and Sweetwater amusing themselves for an hour or more quarreling over the merits of their dog and mule.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ALARM IS GIVEN.

THERE was excitement enough in the town of Rudbury next morning, both private and general.

The town had something to talk about and wonder over.

As for the Rudburys, it was something more than mere excitement with them. It might be the forerunner of deadly peril.

There was an anxious group in the office of the Bank of England Mine.

These were Lord Rudbury, Stavendish, their superintendent, Gwinnett, and Random Peppery the dude of the bicycle—the latter of whom had just entered.

"What is this we hear, this morning?" demanded Rudbury senior.

"About that attack last night, and that flight of rockets, and so forth," supplemented Stavendish.

"No doubt that is just what you have heard," answered the young man, calmly. "That was just what happened. I chanced to be on the line myself at the time it took place, and know all about it; that is to say, as much as any one here knows about it."

"Well, let us hear it from you, then," demanded Lord Rudbury.

"There is not much to tell. I was out on the line, as I said, seeing that the men were at their posts, when, suddenly, there came a great burst of light, and several bright rockets exploded in the air. In a few moments there was another flight, some distance away. Then, after that, a single one darted up from a point about half-way between the others. Shortly after that a volley was fired at two points, and attacks were made upon our line."

"Then the report is true, and not the imaginings of men filled with bad rum?" interrogated Stavendish.

"It is strictly true," affirmed the young man. "I signaled to our men at once, dividing them and sending them to the two points of attack, and we made a noble defense, I can tell you. It lasted about half an hour, and we drove them off without the loss of a man on our part."

"And what was their loss?" inquired Gwinnett.

"Impossible to tell."

"Now the question is, What does that mean?" put Rudbury senior.

"It means that some people, either in this town or a neighboring one, are determined to penetrate that circle," surmised Stavendish; "and it means that we have got to defend our rights," he added.

"Had we not better get right out?" suggested the elder Rudbury.

"Not by a good deal!" exclaimed Stavendish. "We did not come here to get frightened at the first alarm. Even supposing a party should get within that circle, what could they learn? We would be aware that they were there, and we could oust them in short order, when once we got at them."

"That is all very well, but it looks like a sign of danger."

"Then we will prepare for the danger, that is all. That picket-line shall be doubled at once, and they can hold the place against all odds."

"Well, perhaps you are right. What is your opinion of it, Gwinnett?"

"I think the same as Stavendish, sir. That we should not get scared before we are hurt. We have overcome one danger, as we thought it was, and no doubt this will prove something of the same sort."

"Oh, well, no doubt there is something in that; and at any rate, as you say, we can hold the place, and that is everything in the game. If we learn that there is real danger threatening us, we can easily drop down and out, and let them make the most of it they can. By the way, how is the other mine coming on? Have they begun to try to get the water out yet?"

"Haven't heard a word from them. I guess they will have to conclude to abandon it. I do not see what else they can do with it."

"Ha, ha, ha! but that was a happy thought. It is the best thing that I have ever heard of. I have been thinking, however, that they may try in some way to get into our mine, and so learn the truth about it."

So spoke Lord Rudbury.

"I do not see how they can do it," argued Stavendish, "seeing that we have a pass-word, and no one can get in without it."

"Would it not be well to change that pass-word, and caution the men against letting any one get it away from them?" suggested Peppery.

"Just what I was thinking about," agreed Gwinnett. "The old one is old now, and it is barely possible that some one of our men has let it out, in some way, so that our enemies can get hold of it."

"A good suggestion," admitted Rudbury senior, "and it shall be carried out. I will give you a new one this noon."

"And I will—"

At that instant they were interrupted. A man, hatless and coatless, burst into the room. At first no one recognized him, but in a moment they all did. It was Paul Bludstone.

"Why, Paul, what has happened?" inquired the superintendent.

"Everything 'as appened," the man gasped, breathlessly.

"And what is everything?" demanded Stavendish.

"Hi was 'anged last night," the fellow tried to explain, "hand—hand—"

"There, there, my good fellow," broke in Rudbury senior, "get your breath first, and then tell us your story."

The man sat down and panted for a time, for he had been running hard, and the others stood around anxiously waiting to learn what he had to say.

Presently he thought he could proceed with what he had to announce, and started to tell it.

"Has Hi said," he commenced, "Hi was 'anged last night. Hi was captured hand blindfolded hand took to some place, hand there Hi 'ad ha rope put haround me neck, hafter they 'ad tied me 'andshand put ha gag hin me mouth, hand hall because Hi would not tell the pass-word to hour mine."

"Thunder and Mars!" exclaimed Lord Rudbury.

"You did not tell that word, did you?" eagerly demanded Stavendish.

"Not huntill Hi 'ad to, to save me life. Hi didn't," was the answer. "Hi 'eld hout has long has Hi could, but when Hi saw that they really meant to 'ang me, hand me feet was swung clear hof the ground, then Hi 'ad to cave."

"And you say this happened last night?"

"Did Hi say last night? Hi meant the night before last. Hi 'ave been ha prisoner since then, huntill this same hour, when Hi succeeded in getting haway."

"How can that be?" asked Swinnett, "for you were at work yesterday."

"That is so," supported Stavendish, "for I saw you myself."

"Hit was not me," the man protested, "but hit was that man Blanchard, the superintendent hof the Marnin' Star."

"What?"

The exclamation was general.

Here was a surprise indeed, and they looked from one to another in almost dismay. Now the secret of the mine must be known, so far as the flooding of the Morning Star was concerned, and the fact of there being a great cave down there in the under world.

And would not this account for the attack on the previous night? It would look so.

"Has that man been seen this morning?" inquired the old gentleman.

No one present could say that he had.

"And has the supposed Paul Bludstone been seen?" he further asked.

"He did not go down this morning," answered the superintendent.

"He may have gone down since."

"We can easily learn that," was the comment; "I will go down and see if the fellow is there."

"Yes, do so."

The superintendent set out, and the others continued talking upon the matter until he returned.

"He is not there," he announced.

"Then it is clear that he has learned all that he wanted to know, and does not intend to go down again," commented Stavendish.

"There is more than that to it," the superintendent went on to say. "It is said by the guardsmen that he did not come out last night."

"They must be mistaken."

"It would look so, if it were the real Paul Bludstone that we have under consideration, but it is not. It is an enemy that we are after."

"That is true. Well, where can he be?"

"If he has not come out, he must be down there still."

"That is true, too; and if he is there now he must—"

"Never come out," hissed Stavendish.

"E 'as got my clothes on 'im," said the real Bludstone, "so you can't miss 'im."

"We know that," answered the superintendent, "and it was remarked yesterday that Bludstone was acting unlike himself."

"Hi don't wonder hat that."

"Do they know that you have escaped?" inquired Stavendish.

"Hoh, yes, sir; they seen me h afore Hi got to the fence, hand Hi 'ad to do my best to hes-cape."

"Well, you may go, and you need not go down to work to-day. Go over to the boarding-house where night-guardman No. 2 lives, and tell him to come here at once. I guess you will find him up yet. If he has gone to bed, get him out and send him here anyhow."

"Hall right, sir, Hi will do so."

With that the fellow left the office, and, miserably clad as he was, having on nothing but his shirt and an old pair of trowsers, made his way to the boarding-house.

Arriving there, he had no trouble in finding the man he wanted, and having found him, sent him forthwith to the office of the mine.

"You sent for l?" he inquired, in the usual English lower-class way.

"Yes," he was promptly told, and then Stavendish Rudbury inquired:

"Did you see anything of Paul Bludstone down in the mine after quitting-hour last night?"

"No, sir," was the prompt denial, "Hi did not."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, sir, Hi ham sure habout hit, sir."

"Did you see any one?"

"No, sir, Hi did not."

"Very good, you may go. That is all."

The fellow seemed glad to get away so quickly, and lost no time in going.

"Something has got to be done," said Stavendish, decisively. "We will take the hounds and scour that cave, and if our man is there he cannot escape us. And when we get hold of him—"

He did not finish in words.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SOMETHING OF A FAILURE.

"YOU may set it down as an infernal lie!"

This hot exclamation was uttered by Richard Checkering, and he was addressing his daughter. The two were together in the office of the Morning Star Mine.

Ermina was standing with a letter in her hand, and a troubled look was upon her face.

From what has been set forth in a previous chapter, the reader can easily infer the nature of that letter, and the source whence it had come. It was a letter purporting to be from Victoria Rudbury to Harvey Blanchard, and it was one that was well calculated to rouse the ire of that gentleman's now promised bride. It had been sealed, torn open, and had the appearance of having been carried in the pocket for a day or two. It had been sent to Miss Checkering by some unknown person, accompanied with a note that spoke of Blanchard in no terms of eulogy.

Naturally enough it troubled Ermina not a little. She knew not what to do. In her perplexity she sought her father to get advice from him. She had burst in on him in his office, somewhat excited, and inquired where Harvey was. Her father simply told her that he was away for a day or two, and that only served to add fuel to the flame. He had not told her that he was going away. Could it be true, the awful suspicion the found letter raised? She burst in to tears.

"See here, what is the matter?" her father demanded, kindly.

In reply she handed him the letter and the note, and when he had read them he gave vent to the exclamation with which this chapter opens.

The young lady brightened up instantly.

"You think so?" she eagerly queried.

"I can swear to it," Checkering vouched.

"It bears the stamp of a lie on the face of it. Harvey has nothing to do with the Rudburys, although he may have, in a very short time," significantly. "Show your good sense and con-

tempt for the whole matter by paying no attention to it."

"But, father, see the proof. Here is a letter that I know is in Victoria Rudbury's own hand, and it has been sealed, and then opened. You see it is slightly soiled, as though it had been carried in the pocket for a day or two."

"I can't help what the appearances are, my child, it is a lie."

"But, where is Harvey? He did not tell me that he was going away."

"I will tell you that now, in order to put your mind at rest, although I had no intention of doing so. Harvey did not tell you, because he knew it would worry you. He has gone in disguise into the other mine, in order to ferret out their secret, and learn the cause of the water in my mine."

"Then he is in danger?"

"Undoubtedly. But, do not feel alarmed, for he is well able to take care of himself, I think."

"But he is alone, and in their power!"

The letter was of secondary consideration now.

"There, you are beginning to worry about him already. He was wise in not telling you about it, and you can rest assured that I would not have done so, only to clear your mind of the other suspicion."

Her mind went back to the letter.

"How do you explain this?" she asked.

"I do not explain it," was the answer. "All you have got to do is to pay no attention whatever to it. If it is a decoy to get you into trouble, foil them. If it is made up to trouble your mind, do not give any one the satisfaction of knowing that it troubles you in the least. If by any possible chance it should all be true, carry yourself with dignity, and ignore it all."

The natural spirit of the girl arose.

"I do not believe it," she declared, "and I shall follow your advice anyhow. I shall pay no attention to it until I have seen Harvey."

"That is sensible."

The conversation ran on for some time, and then the young lady went home.

When she arrived there, she was met in the sitting-room by her mother.

"Where have you been?" the latter demanded.

"I walked over to the office to see papa," was the truthful answer.

"And what took you over there?"

"I went to inquire where Harvey is."

"And you found out, I suppose?" with a smile that spoke volumes.

"Yes, papa told me where he is," Ermina said. "Why, have you been looking for me? Did you want me?" she asked, to change the subject.

"Yes, I wanted to see you," was the answer; "I have learned something that may be of importance to you."

"Yes?"

"Indeed, yes. You have been so headstrong in going against my wishes in regard to marrying Stavendish Rudbury, that it is with some satisfaction that I am able to tell you something about Harvey Blanchard."

"I do not care to hear it, mamma."

"Nevertheless you shall hear it. Perhaps you are not aware that he is playing you false, and in reality is as good as engaged to no less a person than Victoria Rudbury."

"I do not believe it."

"She will tell you so herself; it was she who told me."

Light dawned upon Ermina. She suspected her mother and Victoria of being the persons who were at work against her happiness. It was hard to hold such a thought against her own mother, but she had sufficient grounds for the suspicion. She knew her mother only too well.

"I do not care," she held out. "I would not believe it then."

"What! do you think that Victoria Rudbury would stoop to a falsehood?"

"I had rather think it of her than of Harvey."

"How blind you are! Why, I happen to know, in fact Victoria told me herself, that she has an engagement with him this very forenoon, up near Double Rock."

"It seems rather strange that she should meet him in so lonely and out-of-the-way a place," Ermina observed.

This was a shot that had not been looked for. "Lovers usually delight in that sort of meetings," her mother returned, when she found the words.

"Well, I shall certainly not interrupt their enjoyment, then," said Ermina, in a calm tone.

"I see you do not believe what I am telling you."

"That has nothing to do with it. I do not disbelieve Mr. Blanchard, and I shall not allow myself to think for a moment that he would deceive me."

"Blind, blind, blind. Then you will not go to Double Rock and see for yourself?"

"Certainly not."

"You will miss something that would be of interest to you, I have no doubt."

"I cannot help that. By the way, it has been well enough known to Victoria Rudbury that Mr. Blanchard has been seeking my hand."

"That is nothing; she is your rival, that is all. And I hope she will win, too. I might then see you make the sensible match."

"If you refer to Stavendish Rudbury, you will never see it."

"When you have— Ha! come and see here!"

As she spoke the woman drew back the curtain from the window, and pointed to something outside.

Ermina arose and looked out.

Victoria Rudbury was just passing on horseback, and looking up and seeing Mrs. Checkering, she waved her hand as she passed.

"She is on her way to Double Rock, I have not the least doubt," Mrs. Checkering observed.

"That may be," answered Ermina, "but she will not see Mr. Blanchard there. I happen to know that he is elsewhere."

"And where is he?"

"I prefer not to tell."

Knowing how thick her mother was with the Rudburys, and now she hated Harvey Blanchard, Ermina thought it best not to let her know anything about what her father had told her.

"Then it is plain that you do not know," the woman insinuated.

"I know only too well."

But little more was said on that head, as Ermina showed a disinclination to talk.

In about an hour Victoria Rudbury came riding back again, and when she came to the Checkering home she stopped, dismounted, and came in.

Mrs. Checkering greeted her warmly, and Ermina civilly enough.

"I have just met with a great disappointment," Victoria chatted. "I went up to Double Rock, expecting to meet a friend there, and my friend did not come. Perhaps you know whom I mean, Mrs. Checkering. It is the first time that I have been disappointed in this way, and I cannot imagine where my friend can be."

Ermina could hardly contain herself. She wanted to let them know that she was aware of their perfidy, but acting upon the advice her father had given, she kept still.

"Yes, I think I know whom you mean," responded Mrs. Checkering, with a smile.

"It is the first time, as I said," Victoria went on, "and it puts me out very much, especially as I requested the meeting. I do not see where he can be— There! I have let out the sex, and I did not mean to do that."

"No matter—no matter."

"By the way, Ermina," she said, turning to her, "Stavendish wanted to be remembered to you, if I saw you to-day. He is so busy that he does not see you often."

"It is just as well," Ermina responded.

"Oh, I would not tell him that for worlds! Surely you do not mean it! He is so devoted to you."

There was no comment.

"And do you know where Mr. Blanchard is?" the treacherous girl further asked.

"Yes."

"And where, pray?"

"He is absenting himself for a day or two, and does not care to have it known where he is."

"That is very strange. I'most always am allowed to know where he is. But, no matter; I suppose that he has had a sudden call away on business."

"Yes, that is it."

Victoria's call was short, and when she went away, it was with a feeling of intense hatred in her heart. Her little scheme had fallen flat, and Ermina had decidedly the advantage. What should she do now? That was a puzzling question.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN A BAD SITUATION.

WE will now return to Harvey Blanchard, Checkering's superintendent, and learn what adventures he met with down there in the bowels of mother earth.

When the men had gone out of the mine he climbed down from his rather dangerous perch, and rubbed his hands to relieve them of the numbness occasioned by holding on to the ragged edge of the rocky wall by main strength.

He listened attentively for some minutes to assure himself that no one was there, and then from the loose overfold of the flannel shirt he wore he brought forth a small dark-lantern.

This he lighted, and with its aid could take a survey of his surroundings.

He found that the rift in the wall ran up to a great height, and that at the height of twenty feet or so it seemed a little wider than it was nearer the ground.

This gave him an idea. If he could climb up to that wider part he might be enabled to get through into the cavern, and by this means avoid an encounter with the guardsman.

He would try it.

When his hands had sufficiently recovered from the first strain, he fastened the lantern to his belt in front, and began to climb up.

If he had been able to do this in the dark before, he was now better prepared to do it again, and in a little time he had reached the point where he had held on to keep out of sight while the men went out of the mine.

Here he stopped, but soon went on, gaining steadily, foot by foot, toward the place that promised admission into the cavern.

At last that point was gained.

It had cost him quite an effort, and it was perilous work. There was but little room to hold on, and the footing was decidedly treacherous.

Stopping to rest, if it could be called resting when every nerve had to be strained to retain his hold, he looked around to study his next move.

He found that he could get through into the cavern, and all beyond him on that side was one great, dense blackness, out of which the cold air came like the breath of a mammoth ice-house.

After a little time he started on, worked his way through the wall, and then began the descent on the other side.

This was the hardest part of it, but after a long and hard fight it was accomplished, and he sunk down, about tired out, upon the rocky floor of the cavern.

He was now beyond the guardsman, and in the forbidden domain.

For half an hour he rested, his lantern turned off so that no one could see its light, and then he arose and prepared to push his investigation further.

Sounds had come to his ears from the distance, and afar off he could see now and again some lights, showing that the cavern was inhabited.

He turned to the left, and allowing himself just enough light to enable him to see where he was stepping, proceeded along the wall. The way was rocky and rough, but with care and caution he moved along without making much noise.

Knowing that he was going toward the place where the guardsman was stationed, he moved more carefully than ever when he thought he ought to be near it, and when he arrived where the opening was he was prepared.

There the guardsman sat, at the other end of the passage, reading a book by the light of the lamp over his head. He was well bundled up in his overcoat and a big blanket, and Harvey quite envied him the last-named article.

Even while he was looking, the man rose up, dropped the blanket from him, and went out into the mine, where he was soon heard busy shaking a stove that was there located.

Blanchard acted upon the impulse of the moment. Turning off his light entirely, he stole swiftly into the passage, caught up the blanket, and retreated while the man was yet at work at the fire.

It was a daring piece of work, and one that might have got him into trouble, but the chill of the cavern led him to take the risk.

He wrapped the blanket about him, and lost no time in getting away from there, as may be imagined.

When he stopped it was because the way was blocked. He came up "all standing" against some sort of frame-work, and turning the light of his lantern on for a second, he saw that had it not been there he would have plunged into a body of water.

Here was the end of the hose that ran up into the mine, and here was where the water had come from with which the Checkering mine had been filled.

It was a revelation that he had not looked for, this great cavern with a river in it; but it did not surprise him that the water had been forced from it into his employer's mine. He considered the Rudburys capable of any such trick of meanness.

Knowing that it would not be safe for him to tarry there, he passed on, giving himself a little more light as he did so, and following the course of the water.

It was not long when the guardsman returned to his post, and his surprise on finding that his blanket was gone can be imagined.

"It's them durn thievin' yaller Injuns!" he exclaimed, following it up with a string of oaths. "Wait till I git holt o' th' one that done it, an' see if I don't kill ther skunk. They are too sly ter live. Come back heur with that blanket, ye dirty pup, or I'll skin ye alive!" he bellowed, having run in to the end of the passage; and for several minutes Blanchard heard him vociferating at the height of his voice, swearing and threatening alternately.

Blanchard felt safe, for he did not think the fellow would dare to leave his post, and he was right. No one pursued him, and after a time quiet reigned once more.

Following the bank of the river, he pushed his way on toward the place where the lights were to be seen occasionally, and from where came the sounds he had heard from time to time.

Making his way with care, and allowing himself only enough light to guide his steps, he advanced with great caution toward this place, where, evidently, the center of interest lay.

In due time he came near, and then he saw that many of the persons there to be seen were the Indians. There were some Englishmen, too, but not many of them.

At this point the river took a turn, and it was just around that bend that a great camp-fire was blazing, and around that the men were

collected. On one side was the river, and on the other were great masses of rocks in wild confusion.

Going from the river, Blanchard dropped upon his hands and knees and crawled toward these rocks, thinking that if he could gain them without being seen he could draw near to the camp and watch all that was done without much danger of being discovered.

He was not mistaken. When he had crossed in safety the space between the river and the rocks, and had gained their shelter, he found no trouble in working his way quite close to the camp, and was soon in a place where he could see without being seen.

This accomplished, he wrapped himself in the stolen blanket and settled down to watch what was going on.

Happening to look up, he was surprised to find that the stars of night could be seen through an opening in the roof of the cavern. Would not this explain why that circle of guardsmen was kept stationed in the mountains? Was it not that this opening might not be discovered, and so the secret of the cavern become known? It looked so.

The main business of those around the fire seemed now to be the preparing of supper, which was progressing finely, and the savory smell of roasting meat greeted the nose of the spy and caused his mouth to water. He was hungry, and knowing that there was no hope of his sharing the roast, he ate some crackers that he had in his pockets.

The meal was prepared and eaten, the remains cleared away, and the fire was banked up for the night. An hour passed, and then one by one the cave-dwellers arranged their beds around it and dropped off into sleep.

Three hours later not one of them was awake, so far as could be judged by appearances.

Blanchard rose, then, lighted his lantern anew, and keeping its light very dim, made his way out of the rocks and set out upon another exploring expedition. He kept on to the left, and in a short time came upon an object that surprised him not a little. There in the cavern stood a building, at one end of which was a large steam-engine. There was life in it, and it had evidently been at work during the day. In the building were dim lights, and by their aid the spy made out that there was some sort of machinery there.

This, whatever it was, was the secret of the cave.

Blanchard extended his investigation as far as he dared, for he had found that there were men around this building, and then retired to a new place in the rocks, near to the building, intending to spend the next twenty-four hours right there to see what the morrow would bring forth.

Wrapping himself in his blanket, he was soon sound asleep. Nor did he awake until there came a blast of a steam-whistle, some hours later, and a great glare of light.

He roused up, then, with a start, and wondered for a second where he could be. It soon rushed upon his mind, and he realized that he was now on hand to see the day's work begin.

The large engine was running, and the glare of light was occasioned by several electric lights that were arranged in the building and outside of it, to answer the purpose of daylight.

Everything was hustle and confusion. The Indians, at the sound of the whistle, were running to their various duties, and the machinery in the building was loudly rumbling and clattering. Another reason why the circle of guardsmen was stationed in the Hills.

Blanchard kept his eyes and ears open, to learn what it all meant, but he felt that there was more going on there than he could understand. Some sort of ore was being smelted, and it was gold; and then in the building there seemed to be work of another nature, too.

There he lay, watching in silent patience, hoping to learn more, but not being successful.

About three hours passed in this manner, and then suddenly he heard the loud baying of dogs. The Indian laborers heard it at about the same time, and at the first alarm they dropped their work and fled from the spot, evidently seeking safety from a danger they had become acquainted with before.

Their overseers tried to bring them back, but all to no purpose, and they could only stand and curse them for cowards.

Nearer and nearer came the dogs, and ere long they were at hand. And after them came a party of men.

Blanchard noticed that the dogs came down the river until they came to a certain point, and that there they turned and crossed over the line of rocks, and, a sudden horrible suspicion came upon him. They were tracking him!

He was right, and in a moment more the dogs, five or six of them, were baying around him, and he was in a bad fix. Up came the men, Stavendish Rudbury and Randolph Gwinnett in the lead, demanding him to surrender. This Blanchard would not do, but opened fire upon them hotly, killing two of the dogs and one man outright, and wounding two or three others. But that availed him little. His weapons were soon empty, and he had then to make an unconditional surrender.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ENEMIES AND FRIENDS.

"HA, ha, ha! that was another good one, Nap, another pooty good one: an' now here is another."

Old Riddles and his dog.

It was early morning, and they had come out a little way from their night's encampment, and were fortifying themselves for the day with a copious supply of riddles of various kinds.

The others of the party were not yet astir; in fact, it was barely light enough down there in the canyon for the old man to see to read.

"Yes, here is another pooty good one," he repeated, "an' here it is: 'What is that which occurs once in a minute, twice in a moment, and yet really don't occur once in an hour, a day, a week, or in fact a hundred years?' Now, old howler, there I've got ye, jest as sure as you're born. That is one that will make your hair curl. Old Saul sez that riddles is all foolishness, an' that his old mule could guess every one in th' book if she could only talk; but I'd like ter see 'em tackle that one, wouldn't you?"

The dog sat and looked up into its master's face, sweeping the ground with its tail, and awaited the signal for a frolic.

"Ye give it up, do ye?" the old man observed, after the pause of a moment. "I shall have to tell ye, then, I reckon. Th' thing that occurs once in a minute, twice in a moment, et cetera, is the letter M. Ho, ho, ho! that wasn't slow, nuther. An' now tackle this one: 'What is that thing that divides by uniting and unites by dividing?' There, if that don't stick ye, then ye kin call me a loonytick; that is all."

The dog was clearly "stuck."

"Ye give that one up, too, do ye, old feller; well, heur is th' answer to it: Th' thing that unites by dividin' and divides by unitin', and so forth, is a pair o' scissors. Ha, ha, ha! that is th' sort that we kin grow fat on, ain't it, Nap? Now tackle this one: 'Why is chloroform like Mendelssohn?' Now I confess to you, Nap, that I don't really understand that myself, but that is what th' book says, an' so I take it fer granted that it must be all right. No doubt ye give it up."

The dog did not seem to "thuse" greatly over it, taking pattern after its master.

"Wal, Nap, I won't worry ye long with that one. Here is what th' book has ter say about it: Chloroform is like Mendelssohn because it is one of the greatest of modern composers. An' now here is another of about th' same heft: 'Why is troy weight like a man with a small conscience?' See what ye kin do with that now."

Napoleon maintained a stolid silence.

"Here it is, Nap, here it is," Old Riddles hastened to go on: "Th' reason why troy weight is like a man with a small conscience, is because it has no scruples. Ho, ho, ho! I see inter that one, don't you?"

As the old ranger here slapped his leg and laughed, the dog frisked around him in a lively manner, and the old man looked pleased at once.

"I thought I could hit ye where ye live, if I kept peggin' away at ye, old howler," he remarked, "an' I reckon I've done it. Now try this one: 'What is that word of five letters, from which if you take away two only one remains?' Now I ruther think that one will make ye hump. But, as you never went ter school, I won't keep ye waitin'. Th' word of five letters, from which if you take away two only one remains, is stone. Now see what ye kin do with this one: 'When may a chair be said to dislike a man?'"

The dog made no reply, of course.

"I'll tell ye, Nap, I'll tell ye; don't git mad; here it is: A chair may be said ter dislike a man when it can't bear him. An' now here—"

A whistle interrupted him.

"Thar, that settles it," the old ranger exclaimed, as he thrust the book into his pocket and answered the whistle with a similar signal, "that settles it, old feller, fer this time. It seems you an' me can't have no fun no more without bein' interrupted by somebody. Them fellers is awake, so we'll have ter git back ter camp an' think about th' business of the day. Come on."

Throwing his rifle upon his shoulder, the old ranger stalked away toward the camp, the dog following at his heels.

When they arrived there they found Sweetwater Saul and Paul Richley up. They had stirred up the fire and were preparing breakfast.

"Where you been off to, now?" inquired Sweetwater. "Been talkin' some more nonsense to that cur?"

"Th' nonsense that I talk ter that noble dog," retorted Riddles, "would be Greek an' Latin ter that fool of a mule o' yours. What is more, you couldn't understand 'em yerself."

"I reckon you are right. I never troubled my head with sich foolishness."

"Ye never had brain enough ter admit o' yer doin' it, that is th' reason."

"If I had as little as you have got I would sell out, an' that is a fact."

"You couldn't do that now; nobody would buy."

"See here," interrupted Richley, "I thought

you quarreled enough last night to satisfy you for a week. Come, drop it, now, and let us have breakfast."

"Right you be," they both exclaimed, and without another word they let it drop, and soon all were enjoying their frugal repast.

When that was done they began again to talk over their plans of action, not having fully decided upon them on the previous night.

"I have been thinking," said Richley, after they had talked for some time, "that it would be a good idea now to go on into this cavern as far as the river you have told me about, and see what we can learn there. If nothing is to be gained, then we will set about finding the Jew's Nose."

"That is what I was goin' ter suggest myself," declared Riddles. "We can't lose anything by goin' in there, an' it is possible that we kin find some way of goin' on inter th' underground camp."

"What do you think about it, Saul?"

"I think it is a good idee," was the response. "We might do wuss. As fer me, howsumdever, you kin set it down fer truth that I don't want ter fall inter th' hands o' them devils any more. If they ain't imps from Satan's hotbed, then there never was any."

"Then that is what we will do. As soon as you are ready we will move on."

So it was settled, and so they set out to do.

It took the two old Graybeards but a little time to pack things up, and when that was done they moved forward into the narrow passage that led to the river.

Presently Old Riddles suggested that they had better leave the mule and the dog at the place they had then reached, for, he explained, if the mule were to slip into the water by any chance, they would be in a bad fix.

This was agreed to immediately, and the mule and the dog, with Sweetwater to guard them, were left behind.

Old Riddles and Richley went on then, and ere long came to the water.

Both were provided with dark lanterns, about the same as the one we have seen Harvey Blanchard use, but larger, and were able to light their way. Sweetwater Saul, too, was left similarly armed.

Here and there they flashed their lights, studying their surroundings well, and Richley was about to say something when a sound reached their ears that caused them to turn off their lights instantly, and remain silent to listen.

Away off in the distance they heard the baying of dogs, soon accompanied with the shouting of men, and then with the firing of pistols.

Harvey Blanchard found himself in a desperate situation.

No sooner had he surrendered, barely, than he was bound hand and foot, and rendered perfectly helpless.

"Your little game worked well, as far as it went," taunted Stavendish Rudbury, "but it has not gone far enough to do any one any good. What you have learned will never be told, for you will never see the light of day again."

"We will take care of you," added Gwinnett.

"And then," and Stavendish stepped up and whispered the words, "I will take care of the pretty Miss Checkering."

Blanchard groaned in spirit, but let no words escape him. He knew that it would not help his case any to have anything to say to these men. He would have to trust himself to the mercy of Providence.

"And let us make short work of him, too," suggested Pepperly, who was one of the party.

"How shall it be done?" asked Stavendish.

"The river," advised Gwinnett. "No way safer. We will bind him yet more securely, and there will not be a possible chance of his escape."

"There has been a doubt about one victim of that kind."

"I do not think there can be. How could a man escape? That 'brother' story must be true. I think. What do you say?"

"Well, into the river he goes. Bind him a little better, and then have the men bring him along."

"Would it not be amusement for the Indians to let them burn him as they do their dead?" suggested Pepperly.

"We will not have anything of that kind," objected Stavendish. "All we want is to have him out of the way; no need to add torture to it."

"I was not serious; but it would make a sure thing of it."

"It will be sure enough," assured Gwinnett, grimly.

Some of the men, Indians, were selected for the work, and taking the helpless man up they carried him away down along the bank of the river, evidently to get him far enough away not to pollute the water near the camp; Stavendish Gwinnett, and the others following them.

Old Riddles and Richley listened attentively to everything that came to their ears, eager to learn all they could, and wondering what could be going on.

They fancied they could hear the rumbling sound of heavy machinery, or something of the kind, and away up the stream seemed to be a white reflection of light, but they could not be sure about that. Perhaps their eyes were not to be trusted.

The confusion of sounds soon ceased, and then for some time nothing but the dull rumble was heard.

"I would like ter know what is goin' on," declared the old ranger. "Saul said this was th' infarnal region, down here, an' I reckon he was right."

"I think he was."

A little time passed; then some flashing lights were seen.

"Ding bast it! but they are comin' this way!" exclaimed Riddles. "They be, by hokey!" he affirmed. "Now, what kin they be up to? I wonder— Say, by hokey! they may be up to th' same trick they played on Saul; an' if they be they kin gamble on't that I will be on hand. Here, hold my clothes!"

"What are you going to do?" demanded Richley.

"I am goin' ter take a swim," was the reply, "an' if they have another victim ter bathe in ther brook, I'm goin' ter have a hand in it, that's what. Here, hold my wearin' parrel, an' in I goes. Keep perfectly mum, an' don't let 'em know you are on ter their leetle game, or it may sp'ile everything."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EXPLOSION COMING.

HAVING stripped himself of most of his clothes, and whispered the words of caution to his companion, the Rocky ranger slipped noiselessly down into the water and struck out for the rock on the opposite side, where he had once before found footing.

It was a cold bath, and required nerve to plunge into it, but if a human life was at stake, that mattered little to the veteran.

Swimming with bold strokes, he went on until he thought he ought to be far enough to find footing on the rock where he had once before stood, and then let down his legs to test it.

He had made a correst guess, for he found the footing he looked for, and had no need to swim further.

"Ding bast it, but it is cold!" he exclaimed under his breath, "an' I hope I won't have ter stay here long ter find out what they are goin' ter do. I will be in a purty fix if it is a lot o' them tan-colored imps comin' heur ter hold a pow-pow, an' they stay an hour or more. I didn't think o' that. That would be what I would call 'zasperatin', an' no mistake."

Shivering in every limb, and trying hard to keep his chattering teeth from making a noise, the old ranger had to grin and bear it, as the saying is.

In the mean time the thoughts of Harvey Blanchard, as he was carried along, were not pleasant. He had heard what his fate was to be, and there was little hope in his mind that he would escape death. It seemed that there was no possible chance for his life.

The men had now put a gag in his mouth, so there was no chance for him to speak, even had he felt inclined to do so.

On they went, until they came to the very place where Sweetwater Saul had been cast into the water, and there they stopped and lay their burden down.

Blanchard was in a state of cold perspiration, as any man in such a position naturally would be. There was no hope now.

Gwinnett stooped and removed the gag from his mouth, and Stavendish observed:

"You will see that your earthly career is about at an end, my fine fellow. If there is anything that you would like to say, now is your chance to say it."

"Any word to send to any of your friends?" added Gwinnett.

"Or any dying requests!" supplemented Pepperly, derisively.

"I have this to say," responded Blanchard, in firm tones, "and I mean it. If you take my life, and there is any such thing as a spirit coming to haunt its murderers, mine shall be with you constantly, you contemptible scoundrels!"

"We will take chances on that," retorted Stavendish, with a laugh. "Is there any word that you would like to send to any young lady of your acquaintance?"

"I have nothing further to say. Go on with your murder!"

"That settles it, then. The sooner it is over the better. Put the gag into his mouth again, Gwinnett!" ordered Stavendish.

The rascally superintendent obeyed.

Several of the men carried torches, and by their light Paul Richley could see all that was going on, and Old Riddles could watch the shadows on the wall, as he had done once before.

There were witnesses to the crime!

What followed was done quickly. The helpless man was lifted, held for an instant over the edge of the rock, and then the hands that held him let go their hold and down the body dropped.

There was a loud plash, and then all was still.

For fully a minute the murderers stood and watched the spot where the body had disappeared, holding their torches over their heads to enable them to see; then they drew back.

The fate of that man, in their minds, was settled. There was no possible chance that he could escape. A minute under the water, tied as he was, was all the proof they need look for to assure themselves of his end.

"That settles it," observed Stavendish. "There will be no 'come back' to him, and it was the same with the other. That story the twin told must be taken as true in that case. How could it be otherwise?"

"Right you are," agreed Gwinnett, "there will be no returning from here. 'Well, let's go back. No need remaining longer in this horrible hole!'"

So they all thought, and went away the way they had come.

In the interim Old Riddles had played his part well, again. No sooner had the body of the doomed man touched the water than he reached out and grabbed it, and, almost at the moment the splash was heard, Harvey Blanchard was in the hands of a friend, and his head was held up out of the water.

Only for the shelving rock, this would have been impossible without discovery, but the rock was there, and a life was saved!

Blanchard could only wonder into whose hands he had fallen, but he looked upon it all as a special intervention of Providence. Even when there had been no hope, when he was being cast into the water, a prayer for help had been upon his lips, and now it would seem that that prayer had been answered. Who can tell?

When the lights had disappeared, and the sound of the men's voices could no longer be heard, then Riddles whistled in a low tone.

Richley answered immediately. He had seen the whole performance, even to the rescue the noble old ranger had made, and he now turned a little light upon the scene.

As soon as this was done, Riddles took the gag from Blanchard's mouth and inquired whether he could swim.

Finding that he could, he lost no time in freeing his hands and feet, and together they struck out for where Richley was holding the light.

In due time they were at the place where Sweetwater was waiting with the dog and mule, and in a little while, they were at the camp, where a fire was quickly made in order that the two chilled men might warm themselves.

When Blanchard had thanked the old ranger for his life until Riddles forbade him mentioning it again, he told them of his adventures and what he had seen and heard.

Paul Richley was especially interested, and questioned him closely. When he had heard all that Blanchard could tell, he said:

"My friends, there is no need now for us to secure further evidence. This man's story is sufficient. We will proceed immediately with the other work we have in hand, and my first plan will be carried out," and he let Blanchard into the whole matter, and asked if he would take a hand in the work.

"Gladly!" Blanchard exclaimed. "Nothing would suit me better. It will be a sweet revenge to bring them to account, and face them, since they feel so sure that I am dead."

"Then I will count upon you, and, as you are at home in Rudbury, you shall have command of the men who are to proceed there."

Plans were discussed, and details arranged, but, as no action could be taken until night, they stretched themselves around the fire to pass the hours as best they could.

When night came on, they filed out of the canyon, and made their way with the greatest caution out of the immediate vicinity.

They were still within the picket-line, however, and as they could not be far from the guardsmen, the utmost care had to be exercised.

Richley took rockets and matches, and, guided by Old Riddles, stole out beyond the line. Half an hour later, Sweetwater Saul, who was watching, saw a single rocket dart up into the sky, and then two others follow it together. That was all.

But, there was a result. Within a few minutes there was an attack upon the guarded line away to the north, and it was kept up for more than an hour.

Why that attack?

While it was in progress, a company of United States soldiers filed down into the canyon, guided by Old Riddles and Richley, and took up their station at the place where the old ranger and his friends had encamped on the previous night.

They were all as silent and orderly as so many shadows, and no one had seen them come. So much for the attack that had drawn attention away from them.

Soon after their arrival, Old Riddles and pard, and Richley and Blanchard went away. There was another part in the game to be played. Some hours later Richley and Riddles returned, having put that other part into the hands of Sweetwater and Blanchard.

All were soon asleep, except those on guard, and the night wore on.

In the mean time, there was excitement again in Rudbury.

Another attack had been made upon Rudbury's men, and the attackers had been driven off. No one could explain what it meant.

Lord Rudbury was perplexed, and again suggested to his son that they make good their escape while there was a clear road for them. This Stavendish would not hear to. He declared they must fight it out, whatever it meant. He could not see how any danger could threaten. How was their secret known? It must be a party of idlers who were bound to reach town from that direction, and that was all.

Gwinnett rather sided with Stavendish, as did Pepperly—if that was his name. They were determined to see it to the end.

Lord Rudbury did not oppose them further, but left them and went home.

When morning came he was not to be found. No one knew where he was. No one had seen him, it would seem. It was thought that he would soon put in an appearance, however.

And there was another missing person. Richard Checkering was making inquiries for his wife. She had left the house on the previous evening, and had not returned yet, and it was some time past the breakfast hour.

Checkering had other things to trouble him, too. The escape of the man his superintendent had taken prisoner, and in whose personality Blanchard was masquerading, gave him great concern for the latter's safety.

The same causes made the roses fade in the cheeks of Ermina, and she had passed an almost sleepless night. It was she who had seen her mother leave the house.

Victoria Rudbury, too, was in an excited state of mind. It need not be a surprise to learn that she had more than one spy among her father's employees, and in the early part of the morning she was made aware of the adventure and fate of the man she loved.

Revenge was her only thought. She went immediately to Checkering.

"I have come to tell you the truth," she said, the moment she came into his presence.

"And what is the truth?" Checkering asked.

"It is this: In the first place, your wife has eloped with my father, and in the next place my brother and the others have murdered Mr. Blanchard, your superintendent!"

It was a terrible shock, and Richard Checkering could hardly realize what he had heard. Many things flooded into his mind, however—many things that he could now fully understand, and he saw that it could all be true.

When he recovered, for he had almost fainted, Victoria Rudbury was gone.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CULMINATING CATASTROPHE.

THE hour of noon was drawing nigh, when the town of Rudbury received a shock that almost paralyzed it.

A company of Uncle Sam's soldiers marched into the place, and took possession of the Bank of England Mine, arresting every man they could find who belonged there.

At the head of this company were Sweetwater Saul, Harvey Blanchard, and one other whose identity it might be hard for the reader to guess. This other was no less a personage than Mr. Chipper A. Quick, the traveling showman!

But, he was a showman no longer. His whole manner was changed, and his trained "critters" were not with him. His face wore a stern, business-like expression, and upon his breast gleamed the badge of the United States Secret Service.

He was, indeed, a Government detective!

They took possession of everything, as stated, made many arrests, and put men on guard. Then a squad was stationed at the entrance to the mine.

There would be more surprises soon, if appearances went for anything.

Random Pepperly was already a prisoner, but Stavendish Rudbury and the superintendent were still at large, and were down in the mine. As for Rudbury senior, it was known that he had made his escape, and men were sent without delay to find and arrest him.

In the mean time another scene was being enacted down in the great cavern.

At an early hour Old Riddles, Paul Richley, and the soldiers under them, had begun the work of bridging the river in the cavern, and in about four hours the work was accomplished. Having no horses to take over, a light bridge answered their purpose, and such a one was not hard to make.

They had worked in silence, and had not been discovered. With so strong a guard circling the place, it had not been thought necessary to put additional watchmen here.

When the bridge was done, they filed over, and spies were sent out, while the others waited for the hour agreed upon to make the attack.

The hour named was noon, or a little later, as

then many of the men of the place would have gone out of the mine for their dinner.

The spies returned and reported, and when the hour came all were ready and eager to advance.

A squad was left at the crossing, to arrest any who might seek to escape in that direction, and the rest of the company moved forward at the proper time.

With cautious and silent tread they advanced, and when they came to the place where the electric lights were blazing, and where stood the building that has been mentioned, they found their work easy.

It was a surprise complete, and they had little trouble in arresting every man there. There was only one little skirmish. Four or five of the Rudbury men went down, when the others soon threw down their arms and called for quarter.

Stavendish and Gwinnett were not there, they having gone out some minutes previously.

Paul Richley immediately invaded the building, and Old Riddles followed.

"Ding bast it!" the old ranger exclaimed, "but I thought th' day o' surprises was past fer Old Riddles. What is th' meanin' o' all this, anyhow? What is this house fur, an' all this machinery? An' what sort o' stuff is this ore? What d'ye know about it, friend Richley? Is it what you told us?"

"Yes, it is what I told you," Richley answered. "The ore is only a blind, I think, to conceal the deeper work, though it may contain a little gold or some other metal. I do not pretend to know. See here, though, and you will know what sort of product the Bank of England Mine has been turning out."

They had invaded a center room in the building, a room that was closed on all sides, with windows high up, and which was lighted with electric lights, and there they found machinery that would not have shamed a Government mint and printing-room. A quantity of English gold and silver coin was there, and a larger quantity of Bank of England notes, all counterfeit!

"Ha! this explains the smelting machinery," exclaimed Richley. "This is something that I did not suspect. Not only have they been printing notes, but they have been issuing coin that is below the standard fineness. Theirs was a deep game, and no mistake."

"I should say it was."

Taking their prisoners with them, they went on to the mine, obliging the prisoners to guide them, and so on out to Rudbury.

Meanwhile other arrests had been made at the mine entrance. When the men had come out for dinner, Stavendish and Gwinnett with them, they were met by the soldiers and the detective, and placed under arrest.

One prisoner was prompt to seek liberty. That was Stavendish Rudbury. He well knew what it meant, and, drawing a revolver, he placed it to his head before any one could interfere and sent a bullet crashing through his brain.

The great scheme of imported villainy was brought to an end! And now for the explanation.

Lord Rudbury, if he had any right to the title—which we will not stop to question, had once held some small office in the real Bank of England. For some cause he had been dropped out. He sought revenge, and at the same time great wealth. He had considerable wealth already, and employed it in the manner shown. He had been a great traveler, and had spent some years in India. His eldest son had once visited America, and by chance had heard of the great cavern in the Rockies. Knowing that his father was in quest of just such a place, he reported it to him, and the result was that an agent was sent out to buy the tract in which it was situated. Then the work was commenced, Rudbury bringing natives of India to make use of, for the principal reason that they could not speak the language.

What it all came to has been shown. Again the proof is positive that all such rascally games must come to naught in the long run. They may prosper for a time, but the end is certain and the retribution great.

But, the extraordinary excitement was not quite over. The final awful act in the drama of real life was yet to be presented.

Victoria Rudbury had not been arrested. She had not been looked for, and it is probable that no one had thought of her.

When the excitement was greatest, and all the town was collected at the Bank of England Mine, she made her way to the residence of Richard Checkering once more, and asked to see Ermina, saying that her business was of the greatest importance.

She was shown in, and when she insisted that she must see Ermina in the most private manner, the unsuspecting girl led her up to her own room.

"I have a confession to make to you," Victoria said, when they were alone. "I know we have not been good friends. In truth we have been rivals. And now let me say in whisper what I have to tell."

As she uttered the words, the young woman

advanced and placed her lips close to the ear of the unsuspecting girl. A dagger was in her hand.

"What I have to say," she whispered, "is this: Take a rival's revenge!"

With the words, she gave a thrust with the dagger into the girl's breast, and Ermina fell senseless to the floor.

Victoria turned instantly away, left the room, closing the door behind her, and passed coolly and deliberately from the house.

She went immediately to the office of the Bank of England Mine. The soldier on duty refused her admission. She inquired for the officer. He was not far away, and came immediately to learn what she wanted.

"There are some private letters of mine in the safe in this office," she explained, "and I would like to get them."

"You will have to have permission from Detective Richley," said the officer.

Just then Richley came along, and the officer explained the matter to him.

"I will look at the letters," he said, "and if I find they are what you say, you may have them. Can you open the safe?"

Victoria said that she could, and they went in.

The young woman went to the safe, and went further too. Springing past the detective, she ran to one end of the room, and there laid hold upon two brass knobs that were placed about a yard apart on the wall. These she drew out, and touched them together.

The effect was instantaneous and startling. There was a dull rumble, like that of an earthquake; the very ground trembled; instantly following came a thunder-like explosion. She had blown up the mine!

"Thank you," she said, with a smile, and turned to go; but she was detained, and placed under arrest.

Little explanation is needed here. The cavern had been prepared so that it could be blown up at any time, and the touching together of the two brass knobs formed the electric circuit that did the work.

The result was awful. Half of one great mountain toppled over and fell into the cavern, closing it forever. Two of the soldiers were never seen, and there met their doom. The others, who had been left further away, at the place where Old Riddles and the other invaders had found entrance, escaped.

Other towns felt the shock, and it was thought to be an earthquake. And they were not told otherwise.

The work of the detectives was well done, but they were in a measure balked in the result, for they had felt proud of the spoils they had captured.

The case had been in their hands for some time. The two Governments had taken the matter in hand, when the counterfeits had been detected and the great extent of the business become known, and their best men had been at work upon it. The English detectives had not made a single point, as they had been looking upon it as the work of some smart "Yankee," and so the American won the game.

Paul Richley was the chief of the force, and "Chipper A. Quick" was one of his ablest assistants. His real name was Howard Boogarth. The traveling showman was one of his very best assumed characters.

It turned out that Ermina Checkering was but slightly wounded, but had fainted at sight of the dagger. As for Victoria, she took poison, and on the following morning was found dead, in her place of imprisonment.

Lord Rudbury was arrested, and together with Mrs. Checkering, was brought back to the town. That false woman would not see her husband or daughter, but stole away from town again during the night, and was never heard of after, unless a body that was found some months later was hers.

"Random Pepperly" was Rudbury's son. He had charge of the guardsmen that encircled the great cavern, and used various disguises in going out to see that they were attending to their duty.

Rudbury, and all the others who remained alive, were severely dealt with, and are in the merciless grasp of the outraged law. The town, with all the property, was finally forfeited, and under another name the place still exists and now honestly prospers.

The Morning Star Mine was freed of the water that was in it, and now Checkering is the possessor of both that and the one Rudbury had owned.

To say that it was a surprise to the guilty rascals to find that Sweetwater Saul and Harvey Blanchard had escaped death at their hands, is hardly necessary. It was a surprise indeed. They were not told how they were saved, however, and had that to ponder over in their spare time, of which they have more than they know how to employ, and are likely to continue to have no less for many years to come.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE HAPPY GRAYBEARDS.

THERE was a wedding at the home of Richard Checkering, about a year after the events we

have recorded, and both the old rangers were on hand. The contracting parties were Harvey Blanchard and Ermina Checkering. It was said of them that a handsomer pair were never wedded.

And now we come to the lines that have been reserved for a parting glance at the honest old rangers.

We find them together in their humble cabin on the Sweetwater River, where we take our leave of them.

They have a mutual understanding that one is to be the other's honored guest for six months in each year. In summer their home is on the Sweetwater, but in winter they go further south and occupy Old Riddles's cabin.

Happy and honest old men they are!

We see them sitting outside the cabin late in the afternoon of a summer day. At the feet of Old Riddles lies his faithful old dog, now so old that its days are surely numbered; and near to Sweetwater Saul stands his petted mule.

"Thar never was, thar never will be, an' thar never kin be, sich a critter as Polly Ann ag'in," Sweetwater observed.

"Exceptin' Napoleon, heur, allus exceptin' him," put in Riddles.

"Not even exceptin' him," refused Saul, "though I do allow that he is a good dog as dogs go."

"An' ain't a dog better'n a mule any day? I'd like ter know it if they ain't. I wouldn't trade Nap fer twenty sich homely brutes as that is."

"Don't talk about what you would do, but talk about what ye kin do. You can't trade th' cur fer one sich mule. No, ner a thousand sich purps, nuther. Fact is, you couldn't buy that mule. Don't I remember th' day that I was shut up in a cabin by a lot o' p'izen Injuns, with my hands an' feet tied fast; an' didn't Polly Ann come an' kick in th' door when they had gone? I reckon she did."

"That is nothin'; I s'pose she got on ter one o' her p'izen kickin' spells, ter which all mules is subjeck, an' kicked at th' cabin by chance. I—"

"It was a mighty lucky chance fer me, anyhow, if ye want ter call it that. It wasn't a hour afore them Injuns war back thar, an' more with 'em, an' they war ready ter burn me in fine style, too."

"Mebby I never told you about th' time I got nabbed by a lot o' ornery outlaws, who was goin' ter hang me, and what Nap heur did on that 'casion. They had me tied fast, and laid out on th' ground. They was round th' fire eatin' supper. Nap he slunk up ahind me an' chawed an' chawed till he'd set me free. Then ding bast me if he didn't go an' tote my old rifle and knife to me. An' it wasn't long afore we was miles away from thar, and they hadn't heerd a sound outen us."

"As I said, he is a good dog as dogs go, but he orter been a mule."

"An' your mule orter been a dog, though it wouldn't been a dog like Nap, fer that would be onpossible."

"You are right: he'd be a heap better one."

"An' if Nap was a mule, he— But, that is one of th' things that it is no use ter talk about. Sich sense as Nap has wouldn't fit a mule no-how."

And so they keep it up, amusing themselves and harming no one. They are fond of each other, and let a third party put in a word and they stand together closer than brothers, defending the good character of either the dog or mule, or both.

After a time they quiet down, and draw apart. Sweetwater takes out his pipe and smokes, while Riddles dives down and brings up his book of riddles, out of which he and the dog take a "dose."

As for his other Book, he and Saul are both deeply interested in that, now, but they keep that in reserve for the days of rest. Riddles has found that there are riddles even in that, and they are both trying to solve them, to their own good. It is the Book, as Riddles says, that is meant to solve the riddles of how to gain life eternal, and he avers that he has found the solution to that greatest yet easiest of riddles. May they find it, profit by it, and gain that happy end—or rather—beginning.

"I can't find anything yet, Saul, that gives much light on th' question of dogs and mules—'specially dogs," Old Riddles will now and then say, "but I hope ter find it; I do indeed. I'd like most ternel well ter take Nap along, an' I reckon you have th' same feelin' to'rds that homely critter o' yourn. I reckon that will be made all right, howsumever; don't you?"

And Saul's answer is that he reckons it will.

THE END.

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